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QUEER STREET

BY EDWARD SHANKS

(II)

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QUEER STREET

BY

EDWARD SHANKS

IN TWO VOLUMES: VOLUME TWO

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TO

MY WIFE

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CHAPTER VII

HOLIDAY

I

ONE morning the *Daily Informer* took it into its head to describe Sir Maurice Blabey as " the mystery man of British finance and industry." Harry Tellus, sitting up in bed, where Huffy had brought him the paper, laughed until he nearly fell out. He was a young man with much belief in his own judgement. But Huffy, when he read this lovely phrase aloud to her, was reproachful.

" I don't know why you always laugh at him," she said. " You know he was ready to do something for you, if you'd followed it up."

" He'll do something for a lot of people," Harry predicted. " Something they won't like."

The circulation of the *Daily Informer* is wide and this description of Sir Maurice was read by many persons. Mona Fenwick thought how wonderful it must be to be Phyllis Blabey. There had been nothing mysterious about her own father, though, for reasons discovered after his death, he had been secretive about his financial position.

George Bullace turned it over in his mind for some minutes and finally smiled with satisfaction. His usefulness to Sir Maurice lay chiefly in the number of people he knew, and one of them was an important member of the staff of the *Daily Informer*. That acquaintanceship had borne fruit, though he had hardly expected quite such a luscious specimen. The

Daily Informer was read by many thousands of small investors.

Mr. Pratz, sitting in his chambers in Hertford Street, could not at first resist a smile. The morning sun was reflected from his small, white teeth upon his ascetic breakfast table. But after he had smiled, he frowned, and he went on frowning at intervals during the morning. He was quite right. He was thinking of the chairman of a certain bank. That gentleman had had the *Daily Informer's* burst of admiration put before him by a secretary, and he had frowned without first smiling.

"Waiter," said Lord Bullinger, who was lunching with Mr. Magsley at their club, "this isn't what I call old Cheshire. See if you can't find me something better. You know, Tim, you and I couldn't do that sort of thing. But Blabey has his wits about him. He knows all about what they call—publicity, isn't it?"

Bertie Farwig judiciously bought a glass of sherry for a prospective client and told him: "You'd better wait for this new flotation of Maurice Blabey's."

"Is it going to be a good thing?" asked the prospective client, looking doubtfully at the sherry as though it were a magic potion that might commit him to something against his will.

"Don't you make any mistake about it," said Bertie confidently. "He's the goods all right. I know him well." He winked at the client and nodded twice or thrice. "Did you see what the *Informer* called him this morning? Well, he may be a mystery to the public so far but—here, slip that down and we'll just have one for the road."

Euan was among those who frowned, but that was because it was his habit to frown at most of the things he read in newspapers. And just now he had something more important to think of. He was breakfasting in the inn at Potham, and he was trying to decide how soon he might decently attempt to see Phyllis. He was also sickly wondering whether he had not made

a fool of himself by coming here at all. Except for being with Phyllis, there was nothing whatever for him to do. Nevertheless a strong instinct had told him that his best chance lay in being with the girl as much as possible, and he had obeyed it.

"What are you going to do with yourself?" Sir Maurice asked curiously, when Euan said that he meant to spend his holiday at Potham. "Do you go in for sailing?"

"Oh no," said Euan vaguely and evasively. "I'm just going to loaf." He hoped now that he would not have too much loafing to do.

But he felt that at half-past nine in the morning it was still too early to go to the Hall to announce his arrival, and he did not know quite how to occupy himself. He moved from the table to a narrow uncomfortable sofa under the window and persuaded Mrs. Tillyard that his presence need not prevent her from clearing the table. While she did so, he continued to turn over the pages of the *Daily Informer* and discovered the result of his father's interview with Barbara Lackland. Mr. Carteret was soulful over the young actress's determination not to accept even the most glittering offer from Hollywood. It seemed a pity to Euan, who turned further and found in the film-notes a confident statement that Barbara Lackland, now appearing in the piece at the Charing Theatre which was just coming off, had accepted a glittering offer from Hollywood.

Mrs. Tillyard, by her manner of clearing away, made it obvious that she thought this a very odd way for a young gentleman to spend the first morning of his holiday. At last Euan grew uncomfortable and slipped out into the deal-boarded passage that led past the bar-parlour and the tap to the street. He paused and gazed irresolutely at a brightly coloured advertisement of ginger ale and the time-table of the local bus service. Then he went out into the air, halting and thrusting his hands into his pockets when

he got there. There was no living thing in sight, save the dog asleep in the middle of the square, the same dog that Phyllis had swerved to avoid when she had first driven him to Potham. So far as he could see it had never moved since that day.

He strolled, hands still in his pockets, towards the dog, looking up at the church clock. It was not quite ten. He gently kicked the dog, which rolled over on its back, ever ready to welcome a new friend. It was a square-shaped terrier, somewhat blotchy as to colour, and it had the face of an animal that likes no one better than anyone else and everybody pretty well. Euan learnt later that it was by law the property of the general shop, but he never saw it anywhere save in the middle of the square. He mechanically rubbed its stomach with his shoe for a little while and then looked round for another amusement.

At last he remembered that he needed tobacco and so he made towards the shop. The interior, which was approached by a flight of steps, was suddenly dark and cool, and it took Euan some moments to realize that it was already occupied by a customer who was exhaustively discussing with the proprietor the relative merits of two brands of starch.

The shop was filled with the odour of cheese, soap, and biscuits. Euan sat down on a packing-case to wait. The customer and the proprietor gave him a casual glance and went on talking about starch. The sun outside was rising little by little in the sky. Euan looked at his watch and fell into a reverie about nothing at all. When he looked at it again he saw with a start that he might now reasonably present himself to Phyllis.

He was half-way through the door when the proprietor called after him in a friendly voice: "You'll come back again, won't you, sir, when we're not so busy?"

"Certainly," cried Euan, no less friendly. "I shall want some starch." He went down the steps in high good spirits and the dog rolled over expectantly on to its back again. But Euan, now he was in movement,

was in no mood for dogs. He gave the beast a perfunctory prod in its middle and made by the churchyard way for the Hall.

Phyllis was not, as he had hoped she might be, in the stables, and Bonnie's stall was empty. He went on therefore to the front door, where Raynes woodenly averred that Miss Blabey was out. Euan wanted to know when she would be in again. Under pressure, Raynes admitted that Mr. Harper might be able to throw some light on the matter.

"Well, then, what about Mr. Harper?" Euan suggested impatiently.

"I will see, sir," said Raynes.

Euan waited until the goggled Mr. Harper came to the door, full of apologies. Lady Blabey, he said, was not up yet, and he believed that Miss Blabey had gone riding.

"Perhaps she'll be back soon?" Euan persisted.

"Perhaps she will," said Mr. Harper, wiping his broad forehead as though he had been relieved of a grave responsibility. "Would you like to come in and wait?"

Euan thought that perhaps he would wait for a few minutes.

"It might interest you," Mr. Harper said solemnly, as though proposing a visit to the tomb of Napoleon, "to see Sir Maurice's work-room."

Euan agreed with equal solemnity, and followed Mr. Harper into a small room which was almost entirely filled by an enormous glass-topped table on which were a blotting-pad and a stand filled with note-paper. Mr. Harper seated himself at a diminutive table, in a corner on which orderly stacks of documents and a telephone left little space for his typewriter.

"That," he said, as he sat down, "is Sir Maurice's own table."

"Indeed?" said Euan.

"Yes, but he never uses it. He prefers to work in an armchair in the hall. Funny, isn't it? But

then a man like Sir Maurice has to work his own way or not at all. Now I furnished this room myself."

"Did you really?" Euan enquired.

"Sir Maurice told me to get what he would need, and I went to Hampton's and got him the best table money could buy. But he never uses it. Funny the way these great men do their work, isn't it, Mr. Cartaret?"

"Why don't you use it?" Euan was moved to ask.

"But it's Sir Maurice's own table." Mr. Harper was shocked. "A man like Sir Maurice couldn't have all my papers on his table. Now, if you don't mind, Mr. Carteret, I must get on with my work. There's a *Times* at your elbow." He began to click rhythmically on the typewriter and Euan unfurled the newspaper.

The Times seemed not to have heard of Sir Maurice Blabey as the mystery man of British finance and industry. But then there were several things on which *The Times* was less informative than the *Daily Informer*. Euan particularly wanted confirmation of the report that Miss Barbara Lackland had accepted a glittering offer from Hollywood. He supposed that whatever his father said must be wrong, but still he wanted the report to be confirmed.

The Times, however, didn't know, or else didn't care. A flourishing business required an energetic partner with a little capital. T. J. hoped that B. L. would forgive all and write. A retired admiral was having a row with an Urban District Council, and a celebrated architect stated with dignified resentment that the War Office had committed on the landscape in his neighbourhood some outrage the nature of which Euan did not stay to ascertain. The greatest living authority patiently expounded his view that there were two sides to the agrarian question in the Bukovina. A leader-writer was painstakingly jocose on young women who played tennis without stockings. But there was nothing about Miss Lackland—nothing at all.

If Euan had penetrated among the dark, figure-strewn defiles of the City page, he would have seen no direct reference to Sir Maurice, but he would have learnt that "electrical manufacturing shares, especially Bullinger-Hopes, continued buoyant as a result of persistent rumours of a reconstruction of the industry." He would have read also that "buying on the basis of these rumours appears so far to be the sheerest speculation."

Euan gave up *The Times* and gazed idly at Mr. Harper, whose large spatulate fingers were dancing daintily upon the absurdly small keys of his typewriter. The telephone bell rang and Mr. Harper took the instrument.

"Yes," he breathed, "yes . . . Sir Maurice Blabey's secretary is speaking. Oh, it's you, Miss Watkins, is it? Now, do you know, Miss Watkins, that memorandum you typed for Sir Maurice won't do at all. No, not at all. You should know by now that Sir Maurice likes the figures set out in red. Yes. Yes, you really should know that by now, shouldn't you, Miss Watkins? Yes, thank you very much. Good-bye, Miss Watkins."

He replaced the receiver and, turning to Euan, said sadly: "You wouldn't believe the trouble I have with the London office, Mr. Cartaret. We have to get some of our work done there, but they don't understand Sir Maurice like I do. They aren't Sir Maurice's secretaries. Oh, no! They're the General Finance Corporation, they are. The other day, when I wanted them to do something in a hurry, they said they'd have to ask Mr. Pratz first. As if there'd be any General Finance Corporation without Sir Maurice! And who's Mr. Pratz, I'd like to know?" He snorted, and his fingers, like deft but elephantine fairies, resumed their dance over the little keys.

"What did you do?" Euan asked.

"Rang up Miss Anstey, of course," said Mr. Harper. "She's loyal to Sir Maurice, at any rate. She put it right at once."

Euan was preparing to ask some questions about Miss Anstey when he saw Phyllis passing by the window, and leapt up with a shout which she did not hear but which disturbed Mr. Harper considerably. He did not wait to pacify Mr. Harper, but ran out and round the corner of the house in pursuit. He overtook the girl just when she was going in from the terrace.

She was wearing the inevitable riding-breeches and a sleeveless, low-cut shirt. Her smile of greeting encouraged him so much that he took one long step towards her and gripped her bare arms.

She cried hastily: "Not here, Euan. Be careful. The gardeners——"

He let her go and followed her into the house, where he was granted the favour of a cool but friendly embrace.

When he released her, she stepped back and said: "I must go and change. Don't go away, will you?"

He went out on to the terrace again and walked up and down, immensely elated by these words. He wouldn't rush it, he would be very careful, but all the same he would have things settled before his holiday was over. And the holiday expanded magically before him, as the faint diaphanous blue of the sky seemed to expand when he turned his dreamily ambitious gaze upon it. A whole fortnight!

Then Phyllis returned, with a Pekinese in her arms, and, before Euan could prevent her, seated herself in a wicker chair, well out on the terrace, in view of all the windows.

"You'll stay to lunch, won't you?" she said in her grown-up voice. "Mother told me to ask you." The sky and Euan's fortnight contracted simultaneously, and both became narrow and grey instead of being spacious and as blue as the halcyon's tail feathers.

"I'd like to, if I may," he mumbled.

"Well, sit down and be interesting," she commanded. "Isn't Fu Manchu a lovely dog?"

"Beautiful," said Euan tonelessly, bracing himself to begin everything all over again.

"He's a *lovely* dog," Phyllis said, burying her face in the tawny hair of Fu Manchu's neck. "He's on a visit, while Barbara closes her flat. He's Barbara's dog, aren't you, precious?" The Pekinese, feeling the pressure uncomfortable, turned round and snarled at her thinly.

"Then Barbara really is going to Hollywood?" he said, trying not to show too much interest.

"Yes. She's got an engagement with Ultra-perfect. I shall miss her terribly."

Certainly, Euan thought, he would begin all over again after luncheon. The omens were auspicious.

But it was not to be immediately after luncheon, as he soon discovered. Lady Blabey picked fretfully at her plate, and at short intervals remembered things that she wanted Phyllis to do for her during the afternoon. There were flowers to be arranged and letters to be written. She had promised to send the recipe for lemon sponge to Miss White, and Phyllis would have to copy it out of the book. Then really the overhauling of the sheets for the servants' beds ought not to be put off any longer. . . .

All this was something of a revelation to Euan. He did not know that Lady Blabey had fits of setting Phyllis to household duties. She thus persuaded herself that she was being a good wife and mother. Euan was sentimentally moved by being brought into contact with Phyllis's daily and unexpectedly domestic life. Lucy, he dimly supposed, did things of this sort, but she did them so as to make them dull and tiresome. They seemed exciting and touching when he thought of them in connection with Phyllis. But he also felt a little depressed, as it gradually became apparent that her time was to be taken up for several hours ahead.

His emotions were almost painfully divided when Phyllis snapped at her mother that surely some of these things could wait. He had thought as much himself, but he had been mainly absorbed in appreciating her dutifulness.

Lady Blabey turned to him with a plaintive expression. "You know, Mr. Cartaret," she said, "I can't look after the house as I used to do, and it upsets me. I'm afraid I wasn't made for a rich man's wife. It hurts me to leave everything to the servants."

"What do you keep servants for?" asked Phyllis, sulkily but rather sensibly.

"You see," Lady Blabey went on, still to Euan, "I want Phyllis to have as good a training as I did. When I was married, I'd been taught how housekeeping ought to be done. I don't know what would have happened to Maurice if he'd married an extravagant wife. He was so extravagant himself. You can't imagine the reckless things I had to stop him doing. When Phyllis marries, I want her to have the same advantages that I had."

Phyllis looked as though she would like to commit the extravagance of smashing a plate or two. Euan attempted the impossible task of suggesting by his expression that he agreed with them both. He did not want to fall out with the mother—and, besides, he did rather incline to agree with her. But he did not want the daughter to think him old-fashioned or stuffy. He achieved in the end what might fairly have been called a smirk.

Raynes asked where coffee should be served. The woman who had not been made to be a rich man's wife said: "On the terrace, Raynes. And please see that the proper cushions are put on my chair. I had the wrong ones yesterday."

Phyllis said, when they were drinking coffee: "Daddy's coming down to-night, isn't he, Mother?" She continued, a little uncertainly: "He's sure to want to see you, Euan. Will you come to dinner?"

Euan looked at Lady Blabey, who was peevishly rearranging her cushions and took no notice of him. Then he accepted.

"Round about eight, you know," said Phyllis in a more confident tone.

Euan felt himself dismissed, and, after a few minutes, rose, though he would have given much to have seen Phyllis overhauling the sheets for the servants' beds. Lady Blabey smiled at him with a wan sleepiness and murmured: "We shall see you again, shan't we, Mr. Cartaret, while you're here?"

"To-night, round about eight," Phyllis repeated, to him, not to her mother.

He strolled down the drive, wondering how he should get through the afternoon. The village was silent, lifeless, and unhelpful. He called to the dog in the middle of the square, thinking that it might like to be taken for a walk, but it only rolled over on its back, though he was not within twenty yards of rubbing distance. He went into the general shop to buy tobacco.

"I'm sorry I was busy, sir," said the proprietor, "when you came in this morning. We're quite slack now."

"Navy Cut," said Euan.

"Now I've a nice mixture here, sir, called Eastern Pleasure. Not many people know of it, but I sell a lot in the village to the younger men."

"Navy Cut, please," said Euan.

"As you like, sir,' said the proprietor, disappointed but not disheartened.

Euan continued strolling, and found that he was half-way down the elm-shaded lane that led to the river-marshes. So he went on until he reached the sea-wall, picked out a bank of thick grass in a sunny bend of it, and there lay down to think about things.

It was not very easy, as he soon discovered, for him to think about any one thing consecutively. There was Phyllis, and, of course, he wanted to think about her more than about anything else. But his mind would run also to Mr. Magsley and the reorganisation of the electrical industry. Mr. Magsley was going to do well out of that, as he deserved to do. Euan should profit at the same time, since he could not doubt Mr. Magsley's friendly feelings towards him. And that, of course,

would make it easier for him to marry Phyllis. He imagined them in a house of their own, discussing the work that he and Mr. Magsley had been doing. It would be a pleasant little house, in Hampstead, perhaps, or, if she preferred it, in Kensington, and he would see her sometimes busying herself about the sheets for the servants' beds. At this point he dozed.

Phyllis was in the servants' wing at Potham Hall, looking at sheets in the company of the cook. She had thought that Mrs. Warmit was the best person to give a decisive opinion.

"What do you think of this one, Mrs. Warmit?" she asked doubtfully.

"Put it sides to middle," said Mrs. Warmit firmly.

"Who's to do that?"

"That lazy slut, Ethel, and then she can sleep on it. I'll tell her, Miss Phyllis."

"Thank you, Mrs. Warmit," said Phyllis gratefully. "If you will."

"I will, miss," the cook promised, with an expression of ferocity. Phyllis left the servants' wing, her duty done.

The sun went behind a cloud, the air grew chilly, and Euan found himself wondering whether Lucy would come to see them, and how she and Phyllis would get on together. The sun came out and he definitely slept. When he woke again he went back to the inn.

From six to seven he tinkered with Mr. Tillyard's wireless set and greatly improved its efficiency. Mr. Tillyard, however, hovered about him from time to time, saying anxiously: "You won't mislay any of them screws, will you, sir?" Euan, since the screws were in his mouth, was unable to answer this appeal reassuringly, but went on in an obstinate endeavour to get clear signals from Witzleben.

When he succeeded, and announced his success, Mr. Tillyard said: "But you can't get the cricket scores from there, can you, sir?"

Euan washed and brushed his hair, and then, until

half-past seven, he consumed, as slowly as he could, two pink gins in the bar-parlour. He felt lonely, but he did not go into the tap because his presence there seemed somewhat to embarrass the labourers. Mr. Tillyard looked in on him at intervals, wiping beer off his hands with a dish-cloth.

"Wonderful what Sir Maurice 'as done for the village," said Mr. Tillyard. "Brought a bit of life into it as you might say. Before, when you 'eard a car, you might be sure it was the doctor's and there was someone ill. Now we 'ear 'em any time Sunday night, and Miss Phyllis, she dashes about the village like I don't know what. But, bless you, I has to keep Sir Maurice back a bit. 'E'd build a Stajum here if the lads was to ask for it. You know what it is, sir, they're not above taking all 'e gives 'em and lifting a rabbit or two off of 'is land at the same time. Now that's what I don't like about these villagers, and the time'll come when Sir Maurice won't like it either. They can't say I haven't warned 'em."

He returned to the tap and Euan heard him saying: "Now, my lad, I don't want no trouble here and I don't need no policeman either. You'd best finish your pint and go. I've dealt with rougher customers than you, and easy too."

There was a rumble of grumbling but subdued voices in reply, and one voice said surlily: "It's only two miles to the Sun at Willinghoe. I reckon we'll finish our pints and go there."

"Go along then," Mr. Tillyard pleasantly adjured the speaker. "I hope you'll come back safe. Don't fall into any of them open drains." There was laughter from some of the older men, but no sound of anyone getting up to go. Euan listened a little longer, in the hope of seeing Mr. Tillyard taking firm action against the troublesome villagers. But it seemed that peace had been restored in the tap. Presently Euan decided that, if he walked very slowly, he could start now and yet not arrive at the Hall before eight o'clock.

He was stern with himself and walked so slowly that it was several minutes past eight when he did arrive, and Phyllis was waiting at the end of the drive to intercept him.

"I thought you were never coming," she said. "I wanted to see you first, because I oughtn't to have asked you to-night."

"Then I'll go back again," he answered shortly.

"No, no, don't be silly—I didn't mean that. But Daddy has brought Mr. Pratz down and they've got something tremendous to do. We mustn't sit long over dinner and we must leave them alone as soon as we can."

Euan's heart bounded. "What shall we do?" he asked.

"Oh, we can go for a walk, or sit on the terrace, or do whatever you like. They'll stay at the table or go into Daddy's work-room. They won't mind us if we get out of their way." Her tone, and her hand, resting lightly for a moment on his arm, expressed comradeship and even complicity, and he was more than content.

"I won't wait for even a single glass of port," he assured her happily.

Sir Maurice, who had not had that assurance, obviously found it necessary to make an effort to welcome him. He did make the effort, but his face looked heavy and lifeless and his eyes tired. Mr. Pratz was brisk and smooth as ever.

"Mr. Magsley's brilliant young assistant," he remarked, in a voice that was certainly unctuous but that might have had also some satirical intention. "Now, what have you discovered since we last met, Mr. Cartaret?"

"I've been tidying up the Glossop dry battery," Euan replied, with a touch of malice, knowing how little this would convey to his questioner, "and I've made it twenty per cent more efficient. Will that affect your plans?"

"It will if we can sell more of them," said Mr. Pratz "Selling is the thing, my young friend. That's where the money comes from that you and Mr. Magsley spend on your experiments."

"But we don't sell them. The Glossop-Hyde Company do that. I was waiting for results from something else and I put in a little work on that battery to fill up time and wipe old Glossop's eye."

"Do they hold master-patents?"

"They do," said Euan with satisfaction. "There's nothing doing in that way."

"We know Sir Eugene Glossop," Sir Maurice interposed. "Your work may come in useful. After all, we are all going to be friends in the electrical business. I wonder whether if we could persuade Bullinger-Hopes to give your improvements to Glossop-Hydes . . . since they can't make use of them themselves. . . . Don't say anything about it, Euan; you shan't suffer."

Euan was pleased by this use of his Christian name. He noticed at the same time that it was a glance almost of appeal that came to him from the eyes of Phyllis's father, and a shock of apprehension went through him. They were the eyes of a man to whom something more, however trivial, to which he must give his attention, was nearly intolerable.

His speculations on this point were not checked when the party went in to dinner. The same expression, he noticed, appeared on Sir Maurice's face when Lady Blabey asked him whether he had made up his mind about their proposed September cruise in the Mediterranean. Again, when Mr. Pratz asked him whether he expected to see Lord Bullinger that week. No matter where the conversation went, it seemed inevitably to go somewhere that distressed Sir Maurice.

Euan, suddenly sensitive, perceived that the dangerous territory was the future, even the future of to-morrow. He therefore broke into the wilderness of half-finished sentences and uneasy silences with an appeal to the past.

"What became of that house in Highgate?" he

asked abruptly. "Do you remember the children's party there?"

It was successful. Sir Maurice said: "I've often regretted that house. I did sell at a profit, though."

Phyllis said: "That was where I tried to hide from Babs among the rhododendrons and found I was sitting on a dead cat."

"I had," said Lady Blabey, "terrible difficulties with the servants there."

"It was during the war, my dear," Sir Maurice reminded her.

"Perhaps it was. But I know they were terribly difficult. They all wanted to go off and be munition-workers."

"I never came to that house, did I, Maurice?" said Mr. Pratz.

"No—you and I were still in the Ritz Grill and Savoy American-Bar stage then. The first time you stayed with us was in Hampshire—that house near Alton, you remember." He smiled affectionately at his old friend, Joseph Pratz. "I sometimes regret that one, too. I lost over it, pretty heavily." The dark-rimmed eyes seemed to survey several years of post-war history and to decide that the war years had been the best. Life had been simpler then and nothing could go wrong.

Raynes and the parlour-maid were putting dessert on the table.

"I'm going to eat cherries out of doors," Phyllis announced. "Fill a plate for me, Euan, and bring it with you."

"I shall go to bed," said Lady Blabey, "if you'll forgive me, Mr. Pratz. Don't get your feet wet, Phyllis. The dew will be thick to-night."

Euan had had the signal he had awaited. He rose and obediently piled a plate with cherries.

"Aren't you going to have any port?" Sir Maurice asked.

"I don't want any."

"Yes, you do." Then, as he hesitated: "Here, take a glass with you." He filled his own empty glass and placed it in Euan's hand. "There, be off with you. Keep my daughter amused. We're going to be busy, I'm afraid, but you won't mind that. Now, Joseph, pass me up that glass and then . . ." A shadow passed again over his face as he resigned himself to serious contemplation of the future.

Euan blundered into the darkness of the terrace, and halted, uncertain where to tread. He balanced the plate of cherries in his right hand and the glass of port in his left and put one foot very carefully in front of the other. Then the drawing-room lights were suddenly turned on and Phyllis came through the french windows. She had changed in this short time into some sort of knitted suit of a dark blue that matched the colour of the night-sky.

"I couldn't go across the fields in my dinner-dress," she explained. "But let me eat my cherries first."

For a time she munched cheerfully and Euan sipped his port.

Then Euan said: "I don't think your father looks very well."

"I think he's worried," she replied. "I wish he'd tell me more about what worries him. You see . . . it's no use if he tries to tell mother."

"I understand," said Euan—and up to a point he did. But he wished like the devil that he understood just what there might be to tell. Was it something that could affect Phyllis? If only he could help and protect her, then all the serious considerations in the world might go hang. She looked at once so confident and so defenceless, lying in her mother's long chair, eating her cherries, again like a large doll, relaxed at the four principal joints of her body.

He finished his port, put the glass down on the table, and went rather diffidently towards her. She looked up and smiled at him. "Have a cherry," she said, putting one in her mouth and letting its twin dangle from her

lips by the stalk. He bent down. After a moment, she pushed him away, and mumbled: "Stop, Euan! I nearly swallowed it whole." She stretched her arm out to keep him off, while she deliberately finished the cherry, then rose with a brisk movement and said: "Come on, we'll go for a walk."

But she paused for a second, touching the stones on her plate one by one. When she had counted them, she glanced at him without speaking and turned towards the steps that led down from the terrace. He stayed behind to count the stones for himself. He was not superstitious, but he was in a mood to seek for omens that would embolden him, and—this year! He turned after her and found her laughing at him.

The moon was rising but it was not full as it had been on the night when they had danced together. The garden was full of shadows and the red roses were black. Euan stumbled, and explained that he was a little night-blind at first. Phyllis did not answer but took his hand and led him to a wicket-gate at the edge of the garden.

"There's a path here," she said in a hushed voice, "that leads down to the river. Can you see it?"

He whispered that his eyes were better, and she released his hand. The second growth in the field was already tall and brushed their knees as they drifted slowly and silently along.

"Oh, look!" cried Phyllis suddenly, startling him by the loudness of her voice. "There's the white owl!" And he looked up in time to see a little grey blur vanishing into a clump of trees, whence for a minute came a soft sound that resembled a snore. "It nests there," she said, hushed again. Neither of them said another word, but he put his arm round her waist and she suffered it—more, she leant upon it, as though the languorous air of the night had invaded her blood and made it hard for her to carry the weight of her body.

They plunged into darkness under the boughs of a grove, the breadth of which he could not see.

"Yes, you do." Then, as he hesitated: "Here, take a glass with you." He filled his own empty glass and placed it in Euan's hand. "There, be off with you. Keep my daughter amused. We're going to be busy, I'm afraid, but you won't mind that. Now, Joseph, pass me up that glass and then . . ." A shadow passed again over his face as he resigned himself to serious contemplation of the future.

Euan blundered into the darkness of the terrace, and halted, uncertain where to tread. He balanced the plate of cherries in his right hand and the glass of port in his left and put one foot very carefully in front of the other. Then the drawing-room lights were suddenly turned on and Phyllis came through the french windows. She had changed in this short time into some sort of knitted suit of a dark blue that matched the colour of the night-sky.

"I couldn't go across the fields in my dinner-dress," she explained. "But let me eat my cherries first."

For a time she munched cheerfully and Euan sipped his port.

Then Euan said: "I don't think your father looks very well."

"I think he's worried," she replied. "I wish he'd tell me more about what worries him. You see . . . it's no use if he tries to tell mother."

"I understand," said Euan—and up to a point he did. But he wished like the devil that he understood just what there might be to tell. Was it something that could affect Phyllis? If only he could help and protect her, then all the serious considerations in the world might go hang. She looked at once so confident and so defenceless, lying in her mother's long chair, eating her cherries, again like a large doll, relaxed at the four principal joints of her body.

He finished his port, put the glass down on the table, and went rather diffidently towards her. She looked up and smiled at him. "Have a cherry," she said, putting one in her mouth and letting its twin dangle from her

gave him was that little sigh which he could not even be certain of having heard.

He paused, bewildered. "You do love me, Phyllis, don't you?" he asked, almost despairingly.

He had to stoop with his ear close to her mouth before he could hear her breathe: "Ye-es." What did that low, lingering tone betray? Abandonment or doubt?

While he wondered, she abruptly sat up and began to smooth her hair. "It must be very late," she said in her ordinary voice, neither low nor loud. She looked at the shining figures of her wrist-watch. "Nearly eleven." And she sprang to her feet, offering her hand to help him to rise. She was all at once the boyish, riding-breeched girl he had seen before. When he stood by her, breathing heavily and conscious that his hands were trembling, she rewarded him with a kiss of her own, or what with her passed for a kiss, a light pressure of soft, unmoving lips on the corner of his mouth.

They walked home more sharply than they had come out. Euan felt dull and confused, but Phyllis was very gay. She told him that Daddy had promised her a new horse for her birthday. She also told him about the man whom she had nearly run over in the most amusing way at Chingford. She remembered and repeated several diverting anecdotes about Mr. Harper. Gradually the certainty that she was happy and in high spirits appeased him, and before they had reached the house he was hopeful again.

There was still a light in the dining-room and he said, hoping to be contradicted: "I suppose it's too late for me to see your father to-night?"

The girl, whose arm had been in his, started away from him and asked quickly: "What do you want to see Daddy for?"

"Well," he said mildly, "it would be good manners on my part, wouldn't it, to tell him what has happened and get his consent and all that sort of thing? I always understood that that was what you did when you got engaged."

"But we're not going to be engaged."

"But, darling——"

"We're not! You asked me to marry you, and I will—if you really want me to . . . some time. . . . But I'm not going to be engaged. I won't!"

"But I meant to go up to-morrow to get some rings for you to look at." Euan was once more pained and at a loss. He felt that this affair was not working as it should: there was an incalculable factor.

"I'm certainly not going to wear a ring," said Phyllis, now cooler in her resistance, but no less determined. "You want to be like that Bullinger-Hope man and make me like his stupid Clarice. You'll be choosing my clothes next."

"I'm not very like Jack Bullinger-Hope," Euan suggested with moderation, "and if it comes to that, you're not very like Clarice Durdingham. And I shouldn't dare to choose your clothes for you: I think you choose them much too well for yourself. But we'll leave that. Don't let's quarrel to-night. Are you really going to marry me?"

"I said I would."

"And you do love me?"

"Ye-es." And with that he had to be content, and with Phyllis's return to a mood of friendliness, when she added: "Anyway, you can't talk to Daddy to-night. He's terribly busy with Mr. Pratz and it might spoil everything if you interrupted him."

Some instinct warned him not to ask whether this meant that he might speak to Sir Maurice in the morning. He had her beautiful arms drooping round him once more for a moment and then set off down the drive, trying to sort out his feelings as he went.

II

But Euan did not ever succeed in sorting out his feelings, either on that night or on any of the days and nights that followed. They were prismatic days,

shot with the colours of satisfaction, disappointment, hope. Every day, except one when Sir Maurice had wanted her in London, he had spent with Phyllis, walking in the marshes, driving in her car, embracing her in the obscurer parts of the garden, or, in the stable, admiring her when, as she sometimes insisted on doing, she groomed Bonnie with her own hands. That one day of absence had been an unspeakable dreariness, with pangs of anxiety added. Phyllis had refused to say when she would return.

"It depends on Daddy's plans," she told him. "We're going to a dinner at the Bullingers'. I must go because mother can't. I don't know what he'll want to do after that. He may be feeling lonely up there."

Euan winced at the assumption that he had no comparable claim on her but dared not say anything. He watched her drive off and wandered disconsolately back to the inn. That evening, in an ecstasy of sentiment, he went to their corner on the sea-wall, and got so far as composing two and a half lines of verse. Then it came to him with renewed force that she had not seemed to care when she saw him again. He returned to the company of Mr. Tillyard, fuddled himself slightly with beer, and went unsteadily to bed. Before he slept, he resolved that he would take the first train to London in the morning and be careful never to see Phyllis again.

But in the morning there was a blessed, though laconic, postcard. "Everything's all right," it said. "Back to-morrow before lunch. Stop me as I go through—if you want to." This was the first time he had ever seen her writing. It was, ever so little, unformed and childish—or he was pleased to think it so.

When he stopped her and got into the car, she said: "I told Daddy I wanted to hurry back, because you wouldn't be here much longer. He didn't mind a bit." His heart jubilated.

He asked her how Lord Bullinger's dinner-party had gone off.

" Oh, it was dull and stuffy," she said. " Sir William Hope took me in and we had nothing to talk about. I was glad to get home early."

It was amid the embraces and endearments with which he celebrated her return that she suggested an instant elopement and a secret marriage. He pointed out to her that she was not yet of age.

" Oh, well," she said, " if you look at it like that . . ."

On the next day she told him that she had made up her mind not to marry until she was twenty-five. " Barbara agrees with me," she added.

" Then why didn't she marry when she was twenty-five? " he asked sulkily. " She must be a bit past that now."

Phyllis laughed at him, but with a touch of resentment. " You don't know anything about Barbara's inner life," she said.

He did not heed the danger signal. Phyllis was his, though she would not yet admit it, and he could not endure that she should quote fools against him. He told her roughly that Barbara was a fraud and a bore.

" Won't you let me know her," Phyllis asked, " when we're married? "

" Darling, if you'll marry me soon, I'll never say another word against Barbara."

" Or to her? Just look boot-faced, like you do now? I don't think she'd ever want to come to our house if you did."

The thought of their house engulfed Euan like a wave, and for a moment prevented him from speaking. He could see it. Of course, it would not be in the least like the Telluses' flat in Paddington, but that was, for some reason, what he did see. It would have, at any rate, the same warm atmosphere of happiness.

" You know, dearest," he assured her eagerly, " I wouldn't interfere with your friends or be rude to them."

" Perhaps," she suggested, " you don't always know when you are being rude to my friends. I think married people ought to have the same friends, don't you? "

"I'm sorry," he said soberly and apologetically. "I can't help disliking everyone who comes near you."

"You make me feel that." Her expression had become sober, too, and thoughtful.

Yet the same night, on the sea-wall, where the thick grasses were now permanently beaten down, she resigned herself into his arms and murmured her sighing replies to his caresses. When he left her at last, his mind was in a complicated condition and his blood quite simply inflamed.

He slept uneasily, not soundly enough to ignore the thunderstorm which scared the early hours of the morning. The thin holland blinds were no protection against the glare of the lightning, and nothing could have shielded any sleeper from the thunder. Also, just outside the window, there was a galvanized iron roof on which the rain threshed like a battery of untuned drums when the darkness had returned and the last echo of the clap was dead.

"The weather has broken," Euan said to himself, turning for the fourth time on to his right side.

He hoped, most seriously, that it had not. And yet it had been too good to last, this long spell of hot dry days, in which he knew that in the warm dusk he would be forgiven all offences committed in the light.

The storm rolled muttering up the river and he slept again. When he finally woke it was out of hearing, and a sort of daylight was coming through the blinds. He sat up and reached out to the chair on which his clothes were hung. He wanted a cigarette —a self-indulgence of the sort which he hated, but one which, he thought, might be excused in the circumstances. It was not raining, but the light promised rain. And the days of his holiday were running out. There were only five of them left.

"It's such a pity, sir," said Mrs. Tillyard, putting the eggs and bacon before him in the parlour. "Just at the end of your time, too."

"Never mind, Mrs. Tillyard," he said, "I think it's going to clear up."

"Not it, sir. When it sets in like this in these parts, it goes on for days and days. When I woke Tillyard up this morning, the first thing 'e says is, 'poor Mr. Cartaret!'"

"That was very kind of him," said Euan, carving reluctantly at an egg.

"Yes, sir. We both of us want you to enjoy yourself, sir."

"You've made me very comfortable, Mrs. Tillyard," he said, trying to smear the egg about his plate so that she would not notice that he was not eating it. He made a convulsive effort to swallow a mouthful of bacon. "I'm sure I'm very grateful to you both." She might, after all, he thought, have postponed these valedictory sentiments until his last day. She seemed to be tolling the bell for a holiday that was dead. Then an unexpected ray of sunshine lighted on his plate, watery and uncertain, but sunshine none the less.

"There," he said triumphantly, "what did I tell you? It's going to be fine." And now he wished that he had not played the fool with that egg.

"Don't be deceived by that, sir," said Mrs. Tillyard in a sad voice. "In these parts that means that it's going to be a really bad day. Is there anything else I can get you, sir?" She put a plate or two on the tin tray which all this time she had been hugging, and withdrew in as bustling a manner as though Euan had all this time been detaining her against her will. He pretended to himself with bread and marmalade for some minutes more, and then walked out into the garden of the inn to see what an impartial mind could make of the weather.

He decided that the smell of it was agreeable but the look of it depressing. The rain-laden air moved fragrantly among Mr. Tillyard's beans and peas and brought a breath of salt from the river. But it also smelt most damnably like more rain, as though there

had not been enough already. The delphiniums and larkspurs and snapdragons were all dashed and stripped by the assault they had suffered. Euan walked out to have a better view of the sky, and the thick raspberry canes flung water at him as he brushed against them. Then a suddenly darker cloud sprinkled him with heavy drops and he retreated into the doorway.

"Too heavy to last," he said to himself, without believing a word of it.

"Letter for you, sir," said Mr. Tillyard at his elbow.

It was from Magsley, who did not often thus favour his assistant. He did so now only to deepen his gloom.

I am being pressed [said Mr. Magsley] into service that frightens me. Your great friend, Sir Maurice, has formed a flattering but, I fear, erroneous opinion of my capacities. He told me again yesterday that the business world stood in need of men like me. His idea of the scientific use of scientific men is to take them away from scientific pursuits and apply them to something else.

Therefore I am going to Stockholm on Thursday to see a mysterious Baron about a question of patent rights which I do not in the least understand. And, therefore, you must be in the laboratory without fail early on Friday morning. There must be somebody of at least moderate intelligence to keep an eye on the Bx solution. I am very sorry. I offer you my best apologies. But it appears that my European reputation will impress the Baron and make him malleable.

I do not know what I have to do with patent rights nor what power Sir Maurice has to send me on missions. He is not yet one of the heaven-born, or, at any rate, not one of *our* heaven-born. The great scheme appears to be hanging fire. Your enemy, old Glossop, seems to want cash, and will not be stayed with preference shares or comforted with first debentures. (You see that I am learning the language and shall be able in time to pass among the heaven-born as one of them.)

But, heaven-born or not, Sir Maurice is deviiishly persuasive, and yesterday I found myself, on the pavement outside Claridge's, committed to this journey and wishing I had refused that second Napoleon brandy. (Incidentally, I saw there another friend of yours, that earnest man,

Lord Kirkmabreck, staring moodily into the window of a milliner's shop.) So you suffer. After all, I have for a long time wanted to visit Stockholm.

Give my compliments to Sir Maurice, if you see him, and to that charming daughter of his. Good luck to yourself.

Euan grinned and swore by turns as he read this letter, and ended by swearing. To-morrow was to be his last day, and to-day, it seemed, was spoilt already. But even as he thus reflected, a moist shaft of light thrust itself among the creepers round the porch where he was standing. He pushed the letter into his pocket and started off at once for the Hall through the last scattering drops of the shower. He meant to force Phyllis to terms to-day. Only a faint voice at the back of his mind asked how long the terms would endure after he had returned to London.

When he rounded the last corner of the drive he saw her standing in the doorway. She waved her riding-switch, and, if he had had any doubt of his desire to continue the troublesome pursuit, it immediately vanished. She made an oddly gallant figure as she stood there. She was so inexperienced in spite of all her pretended sophistication. She was so anxious to be sufficient to herself, though, it seemed plain to Euan, she needed someone closer to her than her preoccupied father or her limp, querulous mother.

As he reached the door, he saw that she was wet through and that her thin shirt was clinging to her shoulders. "Phyllis," he said, "you're soaked. You must go and change at once."

"I got caught in the shower," she answered nonchalantly. "I had any amount of trouble with Bonnie. She hates rain. She tried to bolt with me. It was great fun. I've only just finished rubbing her down."

"Yes, but do go up and change now. I'll wait for you here." His solicitous voice was to the last note that of a doting young husband.

"I'll go up presently," she said in an almost obedient

tone. " But I'm expecting Barbara and George at any moment. She's coming to stay for three or four days. You see, her show's off and she wants a rest before she gets ready to go to Hollywood. So George is bringing her down, and they promised to start early."

Euan tried to keep all expression out of his face. He really did not know quite what he felt. His last day was going to be ruined by the presence of this terrible woman. On the other hand, she was going a third of the world away and would no longer be able to put ideas into Phyllis's desirable head. " Patience, patience," Euan muttered to his soul, and, for the moment, really believed himself capable of it.

He put a reassuring hand on the girl's back, and the clammy touch of the wet shirt on her skin made her start and cry out. She withdrew from him, looking as though she thought him a clumsy fool.

" Sorry," he mumbled. " I suppose you won't want me to-day, if Barbara's coming."

" Don't be silly." She rebuked his prejudice. " You'll help me to give her a good time, won't you, and take her out of herself? She feels so sad about going away. You don't understand Barbara, Euan. You don't know how much she admires you. You're very unjust to her, and she's always talking about you. She thinks it's wonderful to be a scientist. I might be jealous, mightn't I? "

He was spared a reply to these second-hand compliments by the car which shot round the corner and snorted into rest before them. Through the mica windows of the hood, George and Barbara were faintly and steamily visible. Euan, anxious to show that he had no prejudice against any of Phyllis's friends, ran and helped Barbara out with so much heartiness that she almost fell on her face on the gravel.

" Such fun seeing you here, Barbara," he said, standing on her feet again.

George dragged himself out unhelped. " Is your father alone? " he asked.

Phyllis nodded, and he walked straight into the house. The girl shivered slightly and Euan noticed it.

"Phyllis," he exclaimed, "do go and change at once, or you'll get pneumonia or something." He turned to Barbara. "Oughtn't she to change? She was out in that shower."

"Of course she ought," Barbara murmured absently. "Phyllis, has Sir William Hope rung up?"

"Go on, Phyllis," said Euan.

"I thought there might be a message waiting for me," said Barbara. "Would you mind, darling, getting through to his office and seeing if he's there?"

"There isn't a message," Phyllis said briefly. "Do you really think I ought to change, Euan?" He nodded, proud that he was a strong man and able to make her behave sensibly. "Very well, I will." She disappeared, and something told him that he would have to pay later for so much docility. But indeed he was paying already in that he had been left alone with Barbara.

"I suppose I ought to congratulate you," he said with an effort.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I am making an experiment. I feel one ought not to be afraid of the new medium. And, besides, there will be something for me to learn." ("Damn it," Euan said to himself, "does the woman take me for a reporter?") "But I am going away from all the friends who help and sustain me so much. I'm just a little frightened, you know, Mr. Cartaret."

"You'll be all right when you get there," he assured her with confidence. (Could there be a chance that she would weaken at the last moment and stay in England? No, if she said she was frightened, she wasn't. She was going all right.) He added hopefully: "I expect you will get on so well that you'll never want to come back."

She gave him a wan smile. "I believe I shall have opportunities there," she said, "to work at my art. That weighs with me before everything else."

Euan had just decided that he could not stand much more of this, even to please Phyllis, when Bullace rejoined them. He bore a message that Barbara was to go upstairs to her friend. A look of relief appeared on Euan's too expressive face and Bullace seemed amused.

He said to Euan: "Blabey will be out in a minute. He's wrestling in prayer with Mr. Harper. Mr. Harper's filing system is too good for this wicked world. It works beautifully until Blabey tries to find something himself, and then he disorganizes it for three weeks."

"I've never seen anyone quite like Mr. Harper," said Euan, glad they had found a topic of conversation. He felt awkward with Bullace. Harry Tellus's words had had more effect on him than he would have cared to admit, and he could not help seeing in this rather unplaceable person a rival for Phyllis's favour. Bullace made him feel young and inexperienced, and, what indeed he was, inapt for the handling of women.

"You're staying down here, aren't you?" asked the older man after a moment's pause, giving a sideways look at his companion.

"Yes, at the pub." Euan had not noticed before how small Bullace's eyes were, small and closely set. He wondered whether Phyllis too had noticed them.

"Comfortable there, are you?"

"Oh yes, as far as it goes. You know what country pubs are."

There did not appear to be anything more to say. They halted at the end of the terrace and looked up at the sky.

"Clearing," said Bullace.

"The sun will be out soon," Euan contributed.

Bullace looked at him again sideways, and was silent for some moments. When he spoke again, it was in a different tone, a confidential, man-to-man, gloves off, and cards-on-the-table tone. "Where do you stand with Sir Maurice's scheme?" he asked.

"I don't know much about it," Euan replied truthfully

Bullace laughed a little, as one not easily to be taken in. "But it will affect you," he said.

"Do you think it will?" Euan seemed to be doubtful.

"Of course it will, my dear fellow. For example, Sir Maurice is making great plans for Mr. Magsley. He has a tremendous admiration for him."

Euan hoped that Mr. Magsley would not be taken away from his proper work. This was rather a sore point with him at the moment.

"His proper work?" Bullace protested. "He ought to have a wider scope. I know Sir Maurice thinks that he wastes himself specializing as he does. And what about you?"

"My job is the same as Magsley's," Euan replied with quick defensiveness. "I don't want to change it."

"You want to go on doing the same thing all your life?" Bullace was courteously, if incredulously, interested in this strange point of view.

"Different things of the same sort," Euan explained.

"I see. . . . Now I like change. I suppose the War did that for all of us." He faced round and looked down on Euan from the vantage point of two more inches, six or seven more years, and a greater knowledge of the world—or some of it. "So does Blabey—though, of course, he wasn't in the army. He has his finger in a hundred pies. But he's concentrating on electrical schemes just now. Have you heard of the Vallonian electric traction concession?"

Euan had. He saw no harm in saying that Mr. Magsley and he had been overhauling certain designs so that Bullinger, Hope & Co. might be ready to compete for some of the contracts.

"Well, General Finance is behind that. You can see how it all works in, I suppose?" He did not, however, seem confident that Euan would see even a thing that was so very simple. "When the amalgamation scheme goes through here, we shall be able to keep all the contracts in the family."

Euan shook his head doubtfully. "That won't be so easy," he said. "We can't touch the Germans on the mountain railway side of it."

"But we can turn out something good enough, can't we?"

"We haven't got the experience, either in design or manufacture."

Bullace turned his head aside as though he could not help a grimace that good manners bade him hide. "All this is under your hat, you know," he murmured. "I dare say Blabey will say something about it to you himself. But I thought it was only fair to give you an idea how things stood." He hesitated, apparently uncertain whether he should go on. "You see, Magsley's reputation is an asset. He isn't going to be left out—nor are you. There are going to be . . . opportunities."

"I want opportunities just now," said Euan, chuckling inwardly to think how little Bullace knew what he meant by that.

"Splendid," said Bullace with an air of involuntary relief. "Then you'll . . . I mean, I know you've a good deal of influence with Magsley. Difficult chaps, some of you inventors. Of course, now and again one finds one like you, who knows how things really happen. . . ."

He was rambling diffusely on, had just said something about the investment market growing ripe, when Sir Maurice came out of the house, looking hot and wiping his forehead.

"Good God!" Sir Maurice cried. "If that man weren't such a curiosity, I should have to get rid of him. He's sulking with me now because he says I've upset his system."

Hard on these words came Mr. Harper, looking like a displeased owl. "Here is the letter, sir," he stated coldly. "I have managed to find it."

Sir Maurice waved it away. "I don't want it now. Put it on my table."

"I had better," said Mr. Harper, "put it back in the file. Then I shall be able to find it again."

"For God's sake, don't do that," Sir Maurice exploded. "Anything but that. Do you think I want to spend another half-day in that blasted jungle? Wear it next your heart, if you like, Harper, but don't put it back in the file."

"Very good, sir." Mr. Harper's voice was colder than ever. "But if you would give me two or three hours, sir, I feel sure I could explain the system to you."

"I've no doubt you could. And I feel just as sure that I shouldn't understand it, however much you explained it to me. Go away, Harper, and put that letter on my table."

"Very good, sir," said Mr. Harper again. And, holding the letter aggrievedly before him between finger and thumb, he stalked towards the house.

Sir Maurice made an hospitable enquiry and then shouted: "Harper!"

"Sir?"

"Tell Raynes to bring us out a bottle."

"Very good, sir." He made it plain that he approved less than ever. His employer could not, in his eyes, do right that morning.

Raynes brought the bottle out on to the terrace.

"I like the smell here after the rain," said Sir Maurice, removing his nose from the glass. "Have you seen Pratz?" He spoke to Bullace, who shook his head. "He rang me up this morning. He saw Glossop last night, after I left him, and he is going to see him again to-morrow. He seems very hopeful."

"After all, sir," said Bullace, "if anyone can make old Glossop see reason, Mr. Pratz can."

"Joseph will do it." Sir Maurice seemed confident and cheerful. "Then there won't be much else in front of us."

Euan sat silent between them and felt out of it. "I've heard from Magsley," he said at last. "He says he is going to Stockholm for you."

"Fine fellow, Magsley," Sir Maurice cried with enthusiasm. "You know, Cartaret, you scientists make me feel humble. You create things: we can only sell them. Well, we do what we can. We try to help you and we try to give the public the benefit of what you create. Pass the bottle round, George, it's not empty yet."

It was only just empty when Barbara and Phyllis came down, the tray of cocktails close at their heels.

"Daddy!" Phyllis rebuked him. "Champagne in the morning! Aren't you supposed to be on the waggon? Now you won't need a cocktail."

"Elevenses, my dear," Sir Maurice assured his daughter, "just elevenses. I owe it to my position. No one would believe in me as a financier if I didn't drink champagne in the morning."

Lady Blabey, appearing behind Raynes and the tray, made her own contribution to the debate—a pair of slightly raised eyebrows. She said nothing, but allowed Bullace to draw up her long chair and arrange the cushions for her. It was his habit of morning drinking, as she always called it, having heard her grandfather use the phrase, that had first made a coolness between her and Maurice. And in those far-off days he had used just the same argument to her as now to Phyllis. He had told her that he must fall in with the habits of his business acquaintances. But that had been no argument to her way of thinking, since she disapproved of his business acquaintances and had often urged him to drop them.

Now here he was, persuading young men to adopt the pernicious habit, just as he had been persuaded in his own youth. For a moment it occurred to Lady Blabey dimly to wonder whether her daughter would have the same distressing experience of married life that she had had. But it was a difficult subject to consider, and besides, she did not greatly care. In any case, she feared that Phyllis would be more likely to encourage an erring husband than to restrain him.

She looked at the two young men whom Maurice

was corrupting. Mr. Cartaret struck her as a simple and earnest young man, even if he never had much to say for himself. But then Major Bullace was so attentive and had such charming manners. She looked at Phyllis. Phyllis, engaged in vivacious interchange with that Miss Lackland, seemed not to be interested in either of them. Lady Blabey returned to the contemplation of her own strange destiny.

After luncheon, she retired to rest, Sir Maurice to his work-room, and Phyllis and Barbara to some remote feminine fastness of their own. Euan clung on doggedly, making difficult conversation with Bullace. He would have returned to their earlier topic but his companion apparently would have none of it, and it was heavy going. He was rewarded at last by the return of the two girls, Phyllis wearing a frock obviously intended for Barbara in Hollywood. She was by a couple of inches the taller of the two and on her it was scanty. Euan thought that it made her look ridiculous and he loved her all the more, though it also caused him to wish that he were alone with her.

"Our friend, Jack Bullinger-Hope, would approve of you, Phyllis," Bullace grinned. "He thinks that skirts ought to be short."

"He'll be able to dress his Clarice as he likes soon," said Phyllis. "They're going to be married next week." She gave an exaggerated shudder, though at what thought she did not explain.

"He does approve of your clothes anyway," Bullace told her. "Apparently he saw us at the Whirligig the other night after Bullinger's dinner-party. By the way, your father wasn't angry with us for sneaking off early like that, was he?"

"Oh, no." Her answer was a little stiff and self-conscious.

Euan, too, stiffened, and before he quite knew what he was doing, he had taken her by the arm and was walking her off, leaving the other two looking curiously after them.

"What do you think you are doing?" she asked, trying vainly to free herself.

"I'm taking you where I can talk to you," he replied grimly.

"And where's that?" There was a mutinous temper plain in her voice.

Euan said nothing, because he did not know the answer. He had no idea where he was taking her, except away from people whom he disliked. But, encouraged by her having accompanied him so far, he went on until the sight of the open stable-door supplied him with inspiration.

"This will do as well as anywhere," he said, and thrust her into the empty stall next to Bonnie's. Bonnie stirred and clattered her hooves as though in sympathy with her mistress. She too was a virgin who preferred to run free when she got the chance. There was a pleasant, mollifying smell of hay.

Phyllis leant on the manger and became dangerously prudish. "I suppose you know," she said, "that the groom will come in at any moment?"

"I don't want you for long," Euan said. "This is my last day here. I've been called back. Are you going to marry me? May I go to your father and ask him?"

"I've said I'll marry you, haven't I?"

"I know what you've said. Do you mean to do it?"

"I shan't if you try to bully me."

"You didn't tell me you'd been out with Bullace when you went up for that dinner-party," he said with apparent irrelevance.

"I never said I hadn't," she retorted. "We went on to dance."

"You said you were glad to get home early."

"I didn't. And why should I tell you everything I do?"

Euan lost his head. "Does . . . have you let Bullace make love to you?" he demanded furiously.

She hesitated and looked sullen. "Really, Euan, if you're going to behave like this——" she began.

For a moment fear touched his heart and he tried to soften his tone. "Darling," he said, "I'm not bullying you. But I must know, mustn't I? Either you do mean to marry me or you don't. It's a simple question, surely." He really thought that it was quite simple.

The hostile expression disappeared from her face. "Oh, Euan," she said, "I don't know. Don't drive me, please don't drive me. Why are you in such a hurry? It's only a few weeks since we first met."

"I don't want to drive you. I don't ask you to do anything you don't want to do. But it's impossible to go on like this. Can't you make up your mind?"

"No, I can't." That was the truth at last, though he failed to recognize it.

He was reduced to puerility. "But you said you would. You made me think you would—only a minute ago."

"If I did, that's got nothing to do with now."

He suddenly became sober, severe, and elderly. "My dear child," he said in an aloof voice, "I think I'd better leave you to decide for yourself."

"Perhaps you'd better," she murmured.

"Very well, then." There was a silence during which she said nothing. "We'd better not meet again for a little while." She still said nothing. "You know where to find me, if you want to see me." Still silence. "Good-bye, Phyllis." And now the attitude would allow him to linger no more.

He was going reluctantly out of the stable when she cried his name softly after him. He turned and waited. "You know," she said, as though forcing herself to plead, "I do like you, Euan, more—more than anyone except Daddy."

It was not enough: it was, he felt, a good deal less than enough. He placed a cool kiss, intended to express dignity and self-restraint, somewhere near her temple and left her.

He believed, until he had gone fifty yards down the drive, that he had acted wisely and impressively. Then all at once he found himself believing nothing of the sort. He walked cautiously back to the house, keeping close to the hedge. But the girl was no longer in the stables. He reconnoitred further and saw that she had returned to the terrace, where, apparently in high good spirits, she was demonstrating to George and Barbara how badly Barbara's dress fitted her.

III

Euan spent an afternoon of sulks and regrets, trying to read in Mr. Tillyard's garden. The tail-end of the storm had fled after the rest up the river, the sky was clear again with a sort of dewy bloom upon it, and there was promise of just such a night, soft and fragrant, as the night that had gone before. The sulks had vanished, the regrets were tumultuously uppermost when he heard that Mr. Harper was asking for him.

He went in and found the owl-faced secretary in the narrow passage, between the pitch-pine walls, solemnly contemplating the advertisement of mineral waters. He was pleased to see Mr. Harper. He would have been pleased at that moment to see anyone from Potham Hall.

"Hullo," he cried heartily, "come in and have a drink."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Cartaret," Mr. Harper replied. "No. I do not drink. I have come with a message from Sir Maurice."

Euan's heart bounded. This was, perhaps, Phyllis's way of arranging a reconciliation. "You must drink something sometimes," he urged. "Come into the parlour and have one with me. I can't drink alone."

Mr. Harper looked down his nose and primly allowed it to be understood, without prejudice, that Euan might persuade him to drink a small ginger ale. Euan led

him into the bar parlour and said what was necessary to Mr. Tillyard.

"I must deliver my message," said Mr. Harper, sipping. "Sir Maurice says that as this is your last night here, you must dine at the Hall and he will take no refusal."

"I shall be very pleased," Euan replied, bowing, in obedience to an absurd impulse, over his tankard.

Mr. Harper sipped again and fixed his large round spectacles upon Euan. "You know, Mr. Cartaret," he said, "you are very fortunate, if I may say so. Sir Maurice has a wonderful opinion of you."

"You," Euan retorted flippantly, "didn't seem to have a wonderful opinion of him this morning. I thought you were going to sack him and engage another chief."

"Unfortunately," said the secretary, "Sir Maurice won't let me do as much for him as I should like. Impatient, Mr. Cartaret, headstrong, but lovable, very lovable." He shook his head solemnly. "A great man, Mr. Cartaret. I would lay down my life for that man." He drained the rest of his ginger ale in one gulp that was somewhat surprising after his previous sips, but was perhaps meant to hide his emotion. "I won't keep you from him, Mr. Cartaret. He is expecting you now."

He insisted on departing to the cottage where he had rooms. Euan walked with him there and, looking through the open door, saw a table which a chessboard shared with Mr. Harper's neat little supper of cold meat and sliced beetroot. Mr. Harper beamed on the spread of food for the body and food for the mind. He was going to have a happy evening, all tiffs with his employer forgotten in the heady joys of White to play and mate in four moves.

Euan bade him good night and made for the Hall where he found not only Sir Maurice, but also Lord Bullinger and Mr. Pratz. He got a fleeting impression that Sir Maurice and Mr. Pratz were better pleased by

his arrival than he was to see them or Lord Bullinger to see him. There was a momentary tension in the atmosphere. But once more he was introduced to Lord Bullinger, and once more Lord Bullinger chuckled over the hope that Mr. Magsley worked him hard.

"Ah, well, Euan," said Sir Maurice, "it's evidently cocktail time. Those children will be down in a minute." He had the air of a man putting a close to a conversation which he had not enjoyed. He strolled to the edge of the terrace, stretched himself elaborately, and seemed to return refreshed.

"Tell me, Lord Bullinger," Mr. Pratz said, "if I take that house of Harrington's, shall I be able to grow roses there?"

Lord Bullinger hesitated and looked as though he would have liked to return to some previous topic. Then he plunged into a disquisition on soils, rainfall, and local conditions of labour, ending with: "At any rate, you'd have decent neighbours in Hampshire."

"I must," said Mr. Pratz smoothly, "take another look at the place. But the owner is opening his mouth a little wide."

"Dash it all, Pratz," exclaimed Lord Bullinger, "Hoarfields has been in Harrington's family for—oh, well, for sixty years at least, and it's never been let before. You must allow for that."

"I know, I know. I was thinking only of those bathrooms. You see, if I took it I should want to be able to entertain."

"Best rough shooting in the south of England," Lord Bullinger declared with the fervour of an estate-agent. "I tell you what it is, Pratz, we must get you fixed up with a place in the country, then we'll—you will—you know what I mean."

What Mr. Pratz took him to mean was that then Lord Bullinger would be able to regard him more as an equal and less as the sort of person one was reluctantly compelled to meet in business. He said, however: "I'm glad to have your recommendation. When I go

down again, I shall look at the place with new eyes. But——"

Sir Maurice, whom his partner's subdued and impenetrable irony always alarmed, interrupted with the opinion that he would not be able to do better.

"Listen to me, Pratz," said Lord Bullinger, a look of rustic cunning appearing in his eyes. "You offer Harrington four-fifty a year, with an option to buy. Rub it in about those bathrooms. He'll be glad enough to get it, I dare say. All his money is in the iron foundry —or was." He chuckled. "Not a good thing to be in now, is it, Blabey?"

"I still believe that the heavy industries can be rescued," said Sir Maurice, a little heavily as became the subject. "Now, this man Harrington——"

"Let's stick to what we've got, Maurice," said Mr. Pratz, with a sharp jocularity. "And what I've got at the moment, by the way, is the strongest cocktail I've ever tasted. Mr. Cartaret, you're the youngest here and you ought to be an expert on cocktails. What do you make of this?"

Euan confessed that he was not an expert.

"Disappointing," Mr. Pratz observed. "Now I'm always reading about the younger generation that lives on these funny little drinks. Somehow I never meet it. Do you, Lord Bullinger?"

"My nephew, Jack Bullinger-Hope, you know," Lord Bullinger hazarded doubtfully. "He plays polo and races at Brooklands and goes to night-clubs. You must have seen paragraphs about him in the newspapers."

"I haven't noticed," said Mr. Pratz, "that it impairs his capacity for business. When next I meet Captain Bullinger-Hope to discuss affairs, it would relieve me to think he had been disarmed by even one cocktail too many."

"As a matter of fact," Lord Bullinger admitted, "Jack has a good business head when he likes to use it. I meant to tell you that he called on me this morning and——"

"Mr. Cartaret," Mr. Pratz broke in quickly, "when last we met you were telling me about one of your experiments. What was it now?"

He had the air of having discovered that Euan was being left out of the conversation. And so Euan was. But he was giving the whole of his mind to a watch on the window whence Phyllis might be expected presently to emerge. Had her father's invitation really come from her? How would she greet him? Why had she not made an opportunity of being alone with him for at least five minutes before dinner?

But when she came, she did not greet him at all. Her arm was round the waist of her companion, on whom Lord Bullinger looked with an eye of favour and good fellowship.

"How's my old friend and relative, Hope?" he asked. "Topsy, I think, you call him. My word, Miss Lackland, I should like to call him Topsy at a board meeting one day and then see what would happen."

The two young women laughed at this picture and Euan painfully enjoyed the rippling sweetness of Phyllis's mirth. Lord Bullinger was encouraged and turned his chair towards them.

"You young things don't know," he said with elderly roguishness, "what our board meetings are like. I mustn't speak evil of my fellow-directors, but it would be fair to call them solemn."

Barbara and Phyllis laughed again and Lord Bullinger seemed to swell a little and to beam with increased effulgence. His good humour continued throughout dinner and he even tried the extraordinary experiment of being jocular with Lady Blabey. She looked puzzled but remembered he was a peer, supposed his intentions were good, and let it pass.

After dinner, Euan innocently thought that he would again be in the way, and so suggested that he should join the ladies in advance of the others. Anyway, there was nothing he wanted more than to join the ladies. But Sir Maurice would not hear of it.

"Phyllis takes up so much of your time," he said genially, "that I never see anything of you. She must do without you for a little while to-night."

Lord Bullinger and Mr. Pratz both regarded Euan with interest. As the almost acknowledged lover of a beautiful girl, he acquired a new importance in their eyes. He coloured a little, sat down and fidgeted, conscious that they were still thinking about him and Phyllis. He hoped they would soon be ready to rise. If they sat as long over the port as Sir Maurice sometimes chose to sit, it was quite likely that Phyllis and Barbara would go to bed without waiting for them.

And the talk went limpingly. Lord Bullinger felt that he had but one point of contact with Euan and that was Mr. Magsley. He told some anecdotes of his schooldays in which Mr. Magsley figured without point. Mr. Pratz displayed discreet appreciation. Then the exchanges flagged, and Lord Bullinger revived them by asking Euan whether he was really afraid of his chief.

"I dread him," Euan said.

"Fancy that," exclaimed Lord Bullinger, pulling at his white moustache. "Now at Winchester none of us minded him, even when he was head of the school."

Euan heard voices outside in the hall and with all his strength willed that Sir Maurice should be inclined to rise. Either his will-power or his luck was successful. Sir Maurice looked at his watch and got up slowly. Euan got up quickly. Lord Bullinger poured out another glass of port.

Mr. Pratz rose too. "Well, Maurice," he said, "I think an early night wouldn't do us any harm." He made a distinct movement towards the door and at the same time gave Euan a glance from soft, sympathetic eyes to show that he was doing what he could.

"I quite agree with you," Lord Bullinger yawned. "This air of yours makes me sleepy, you know, Blabey. And I can tell you a curious thing—I always sleep better in a strange bed. I don't know why it is——"

Mr. Pratz gave Euan an unmistakable nudge in the ribs. "Don't be polite," said Mr. Pratz's elbow. "Go and catch her while there's time."

Euan obeyed. But the hall was empty and there was only one light burning. He heard a door closing overhead and whistled softly on the off-chance.

Phyllis showed herself at the turn of the stairs. "Is that you, Euan?" she asked.

"It's me. Come down."

She came down a few steps and said: "I didn't think you wanted to see me to-night."

"I'm going back to-morrow," he told her.

"Oh, to-morrow? I've promised to take Barbara over to see some friends of hers at Willinghoe. We shall be away most of the day."

"I see," he said in a dull voice. "Then I'll say good-bye to you now. I'm taking the afternoon train."

Her answer was to slide down the banisters, all a flurry of short skirts and long legs. He received her in his arms at the bottom, but she extricated herself at once.

"I'm sorry you're going," she said primly. "What time is your train?"

He gave her the time.

"I'll be there to see you off. I really will."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course I do. Then we'll get a minute to ourselves. I'll come to the inn and drive you to the station. Say good night to me. Barbara's waiting in my room."

He said good night to her until she lost her breath, wrenched herself from his arms, and ran panting upstairs. He was breathless too, and paused a moment before returning to the dining-room.

Mr. Pratz signalled with his dark accomplice's eyes that, if he had not known how to get the others away from the table, he had at least been clever enough to keep them there. Lord Bullinger had entered on the

third chapter of his reminiscences of insomnia and was perfectly happy. Sir Maurice wore the strained, alert expression of a man who fears that if he once relaxes his concentration he will yawn. The party broke up about half an hour later.

At half-past three on the following afternoon Euan arranged himself and his baggage on the door-step of the inn. His train was due to go at ten minutes past four.

"No," he said in reply to Mr. Tillyard's enquiry, "I haven't ordered the cab. Miss Blabey is going to fetch me."

"And very nice too," said Mr. Tillyard to his wife, out of Euan's hearing.

At five to four, he returned and remarked that it was a longish way to the station, and Euan scowled at him.

At four o'clock Phyllis drove up at a great pace, with Barbara by her side.

"We simply couldn't get away," she called. "Jump in and we can just do it."

Euan flung himself and his baggage into the back seat and they alarmingly did it. Phyllis carried one suit-case on to the platform and he the other, and he scrambled into a carriage.

"Good-bye, dearest. I'll write to you," he exclaimed in anguish as the train began to move.

"Good-bye. See you soon in London." She waved to him, gracefully, charmingly.

And there he was, with an hour's journey before him and not even a magazine to occupy his mind.

CHAPTER VIII

DIVERSION

MONA FENWICK was having a bad time, a really bad time. Mr. Rosenberg, back from the Riviera, seemed to have changed his attitude towards her. He was tired of employing a lady. Her charm for him in that capacity had worn off, but it had left another behind it, a charm which she less liked exercising.

Mr. Rosenberg had taken possession of the office. He was sitting in Mona's own chair, and he had put his hat, stick, and lemon-coloured gloves on the only other chair in the room. He had made this disposition with a rather significant air, and Mona gathered from it that she was to stand while he was speaking to her. She stood therefore, with her hands behind her back, like a schoolgirl who has been brought up before the headmistress. She knew that it was not the right attitude, but for the life of her she could not help it.

" I come back from the Riviera," said Mr. Rosenberg in a deep tone, the distant rumblings of thunder before the storm, " and what do I find? Turnover down *again* last week. How d'you think I can keep it up? Ain't I nearly ruined as it is? Don't look at me like that, Miss Fenwick. Please answer me when I ask you a question."

Mona continued to look at him, though she was feeling uncomfortably frightened, and she took him in to the last detail. A short, thick man, with thick knees thrust out, and a square, hairy hand placed on each of them—grey pin-point suit shaped a little too

closely at the waist and spreading over the broad hips—double-breasted coat that fitted rather badly over the heavy shoulders—dyed carnation in the button-hole—Ascot tie with a black pearl stuck in it—thick neck, hardly visible. She lifted her gaze above the thick neck, above the bluish chin, above the full hard mouth, to the large dark eyes, that ought to have been soft and soulful, but weren't.

"It isn't my fault," she muttered, feeling that perhaps she was not putting her case very well.

"Not your fault!" said Mr. Rosenberg, his voice going down the scale in increasing scorn. "Whose fault is it then? Mine?"

She began to stammer excuses, knowing that she was on the edge of tears and fearing that she showed it all too plainly. She did, and the effect on her employer was instant. The large eyes and the full mouth softened terrifyingly, and the hairy hands came out in a grab that could not have been foreseen.

"Don't cry, girlie," said Mr. Rosenberg in a thick voice.

Mona was dazed. She did not realize that she was being placed on Mr. Rosenberg's knee, until she heard him crying: "Here, look out for my flower!" Then she began to struggle—hopelessly, she discovered. The man was unexpectedly strong, and apparently he had known other young women who had not wanted to sit on his knee any more than she did. He countered her efforts with skill and in silence, and she knew that to scream would be to lose her job.

She was drawing in her breath to scream when Miss Walton knocked loudly on the door and entered after a pause long enough to enable Mona to get a yard away from her ravisher.

"It's Lord Kirkmabreck," said Miss Walton, staring at a point somewhere between the two of them. "He insists on seeing you, Miss Fenwick. Something about Lady Kirkmabreck's dress, he says."

"All right," Mona answered, panting a little and

trying to smooth herself down. "I'll go." She made a hurried movement towards the door.

"No, you don't," exclaimed Mr. Rosenberg, whose eyes had gone hard again. "Who is it, do you say? Lord Kirkmabreck? Make yourself tidy, please, Miss Fenwick, before you talk to a customer like that. I'll go and apologize to him. Put your hair straight, please, and look at your face in the glass."

"Been having a bit of a rough passage?" Miss Walton enquired when Mr. Rosenberg had gone out. "Well, if the takings drop off, you know. . . ." She smiled cynically and followed her employer.

Mona did not answer. She obediently looked in the glass and put her hair straight. She looked again and dabbed generous dollops of rouge on very white cheeks. A touch with the powder puff and she was ready, all but for the uncertainty of her breathing. She waited a moment for that, and then went into the shop.

Mr. Rosenberg was being very obliging and courteous. Lord Kirkmabreck was stammering something to him, but neither of them knew what.

"Ah, here's Miss Fenwick," said Mr. Rosenberg. "Now, Miss Fenwick, please attend very carefully to his lordship's instructions. You can depend on Miss Fenwick, my lord. She is one of my best assistants. Good afternoon, my lord."

"Er—good afternoon," said Kirkmabreck, who, after Mona's entry, seemed to have forgotten his existence.

Mr. Rosenberg smiled benevolently upon the pair of them and bowed himself back into the office. Mona turned to the Earl with a difficult smile.

The Earl said: "D-don't worry." Then they stood looking at one another, and Miss Walton and the second sales judged it best to retreat to the workroom.

They were still looking at one another when Mr. Rosenberg came out of the office, with his hat in one hand and his ivory-topped stick in the other.

"Perhaps," he said suavely, "his lordship would like you to take him into the office." He put his hat

on, took it off in a sweep to Lord Kirkmabreck, and went into the street.

Mona drew a very deep breath. "Do you mind," she said, "if I sit in that chair and scream the shop down?"

"No, n-no, of course," Lord Kirkmabreck assured her. He made a vague movement as though to push the chair forward for her to sit and scream in.

"All right," Mona said. "If you wouldn't mind, I don't want to."

"You know," he whispered, "it wasn't about my wife's dress at all."

Mona smiled encouragingly. "No? What was it, then?" The spectacle of a man who seemed to be afraid of her was rapidly restoring her self-respect.

Lord Kirkmabreck's nose pointed towards the soft-carpeted floor, continuing the rhythmical curve that began somewhere in the small of his back. "I just—er—wondered," he managed to articulate.

Mona was now in perfect control of herself. "Wondered what?" she asked.

"Oh, just—er—how you were getting on. We danced together the other night . . . by the way, you do remember who I am, don't you?" The nose came up again a little, and above it were two pale blue eyes that fixed themselves appealingly on hers.

"Of course I do, Lord Kirkmabreck," said Mona.

"You've got my name absolutely right," he declared with evident gratification. "People usually get it a bit wrong when they don't know me very well. Well, what I was going to suggest was—I mean, I say, could you come and have tea with me?"

"But the shop doesn't close till six."

Lord Kirkmabreck looked dejected again. "Is that too late for tea?" he asked, clearly without much hope.

"Oh, hell!" cried Mona. "Let the shop look after itself for once. I'll come if you really want me to."

"Will you really?" The nose ascended and looked almost triumphant.

Mona ran back to the workroom and, to judge by the sudden silence that greeted her entry, cut short Miss Walton's spirited account of what had been going on in the office and the shop. The workgirls stared with curiosity and envy at the heroine of the story. It was so like the serials in *Anne's Weekly*. The shimmer of colour on the table before them lay neglected, and the presser had forgotten her iron, which was growing red-hot. Mona, too, felt for a moment like the heroine of a serial as she said to Miss Walton: "You've got to look after things and lock up. I'm going out."

"Don't worry, Fenwick dear," said Miss Walton. "We'll see to everything." She and the second sales followed into the office after Mona, who snatched her hat, jammed it on her head, then crossed over to the glass to adjust it. She also adjusted her cheeks a little, finding that much of the rouge she had put on them had become superfluous.

"Remember that you can't be too careful," Miss Walton warned her, with sophisticated satire. "Good-bye, and good luck to you."

"Good luck to you, too," cried Mona gaily. "Don't forget to lock up properly."

"Does she think I'm a fool?" asked Miss Walton of the second sales, walking into the empty shop and disposing herself at ease in the customers' arm-chair.

"I should hope not," said the second sales. "But I think, if you ask me, that she's a bit of a fool herself."

"She doesn't know what she's up against," Miss Walton remarked indulgently. "She thinks that she's getting on well here. But she's not really in the business at all. Just playing at it. She doesn't know how to handle Rosie: she's got nothing to handle him with. Now I'm *in* the business."

"You ought to be manageress," said the second sales devoutly.

"I don't care." Miss Walton shrugged her shoulders. "I'm only here to get experience and connections. Next year Montie and I will have enough to start on

our own, with what Father's going to give me when we're married. I'm going to be manageress of that shop, I can tell you. But I'm *in* the business. Rosie won't want anything from me on the side. Besides, my father knows him: they were at school together."

"My uncle," said the second sales, "is the Rabbi at the synagogue Rosie goes to in Hampstead."

"Yes, we're all right. And Fenwick may last a bit longer if she gets a pull with this Kirk—— whatever-it-is. I must say I'd sooner have Rosie myself, if I had to be a bad girl. He doesn't look like a cage-bird."

"But he *is* an Earl," said the second sales. "I saw his picture in one of the papers the other day. Suppose he gave up everything for Fenwick and made his wife divorce him?"

"His wife," Miss Walton announced, "has all the money. I've seen 'em together. And, Earl or no, he looks like a poor fish to me. But I suppose he's more Fenwick's sort than Rosie is. Come on. We might as well begin tidying up. There won't be anyone else in to-night. Turnover down again!"

II

Lord Kirkmabreck took Mona to tea at Rumpelmayer's, but there was little conversation between them. He sat silent, wondering whether he dared ask her to dine with him. She, between spurts of vivacity, wondered why he did not. They parted with a common sense of disappointment, he to his club and she to hers.

But they were to meet again before long, and, of course, as Mona told herself, in the most unfortunate circumstances. It did not often happen to her to be chatting in the public street with both Mrs. Battcock and Mrs. Williams at the same time. But she had encountered Mrs. Battcock on the doorstep and they had stayed there to make polite comments on the curious milky appearance of the sky. There was a

storm brewing, they knew, and they both said so several times. Then, just as they were going to say it again, Mrs. Williams rose from the basement, carrying a jug.

"It isn't me, you know," said Mrs. Williams automatically, "it's Mr. Williams."

At that moment Lord Kirkmabreck slouched nervously into view on the other side of the street. He saw the group, recognized Mona, and crossed with his hat in his hand.

"Hullo . . . er . . . you do know who I am, don't you?" he said.

Mona felt embarrassed by her company, felt ashamed of herself for being embarrassed, and went on being embarrassed all the same. She also felt that she was blushing. But she managed to present Lord Kirkmabreck to Mrs. Battcock and Mrs. Williams. They were deeply impressed, so deeply that they retreated into the house after making no more than a few inarticulate noises apiece. Mona was conscious that she ought to leave the way clear for Mrs. Williams to come out again with the jug. Mr. Williams was probably fretting for his supper beer. But the Earl stayed where he was, still holding his hat and looking at her with a pleased expression.

"Where are you going?" she asked, for want of anything better to say.

"I wasn't really going anywhere," said the Earl. "As a matter of fact, I was lost. Is this anywhere near Oxford Street?"

"Not very," said Mona.

"I thought not. You see, I've been to look at a car. . . . I mean, a car that I'm going to have when I'm allowed to drive again. . . . You did know that my licence was suspended, didn't you?"

"I didn't. What a shame!"

"Oh, no, they were quite right. Gladys and Emily said they were. But now you know why I haven't got a car. I say, will you have dinner with me tonight?"

Mona was unhappily aware that Mrs. Battcock had gone with Mrs. Williams to the basement sitting-room and that they were both watching her. She gave one uneasy glance over her shoulder, and saw a lace curtain falling hastily and untidily into place.

"I'll meet you," she said briefly. "When and where?"

"We needn't dress, need we? You see, I don't want to go home again." Mona looked at him doubtfully and he went on: "It'd take so much time. I don't dress very quickly."

Mona thought for a minute and then said to him: "Would you mind sitting for five minutes in the hall? It won't take me longer than that to put on a fresh frock and wash my face. I promise you, I won't be longer than five minutes." She had learnt that you must never ask men to wait long, though, once they have been persuaded to begin waiting, it is usually safe to keep them as long as may be necessary.

Lord Kirkmabreck stuttered his delighted assent and she admitted him to the house. There was a straight-backed wooden chair, next to the hat-rack, and she placed him in it. He sat there decorously, with his hat and gloves on his knees and his stick in his right hand. She fled upstairs, resolved to keep her word as nearly as she could. The prospect of the evening warmed her more than she could have thought possible. He was a nice little man. It was a pity he stammered so, and a pity, too, that he was not an inch or more taller. But he had made Mona think better of herself already. She did not believe that his presence in Gilderoy Street was due to an accident: she had given him her address when they had parted outside Rumpelmayer's.

She contemplated the possibility of a bath but dismissed it—it would take too long for the water to run hot, if it ever did. But she made a complete change, even to putting on the pair of stockings that, in the ordinary way, she kept to wear with her only good evening frock. She was just carefully pulling the seam

straight on her left leg when Mrs. Battcock knocked and entered.

" I wondered," said Mrs. Battcock drearily, " whether, as you're going out, you could let me have that half-crown back. I mean, I thought perhaps you wouldn't want it."

" I'm dreadfully sorry, Mrs. Battcock," Mona cried. " There's my bag on the dressing-table—if you wouldn't mind looking in it."

Mrs. Battcock opened the bag, made a clumsy movement, and spilt most of the contents, including two pawn tickets. " My dear, I'm so sorry," she exclaimed. " Here, I've taken the half-crown. You're sure you can spare it, dear, aren't you? " She peered at the little heap of coins that was left on the dressing-table. " I mean, as you're going out——"

" I'm not going to pay for my own dinner, if that's what you mean," said Mona, still coaxing the intractable seam.

" I'm glad of that, dear. You see, Mrs. Williams and I are going to the pictures, when she's got Mr. Williams his supper, and I've got enough, but still one likes to have a little extra in one's pocket, doesn't one? I do hope it hasn't put you out, dear? "

" Not a bit," said Mona with exasperated geniality. The seam would not come straight, and she ascribed its obstinacy to Mrs. Battcock. She felt also that she wanted to do her hair again, and she knew that the five minutes she had promised had run over ten.

" I'm so glad, dear." Mrs. Battcock got halfway through the door. " We might go to the pictures one night, you and I, mightn't we, if you're not booked up all the time? "

" Yes, let's," said Mona, throwing a hearty, false enthusiasm into her voice. She was undoing her suspender in the hope that it might be proved to be at fault.

" Only not next Tuesday, dear, because Mr. Battcock may be coming to see me then."

" Not next Tuesday, then," Mona agreed.

" You see, things are going better and he may want for us to take a little house somewhere. So, of course, we must talk it over together, mustn't we? In a friendly way, I mean? "

" Of course. I'm sure I hope you'll be happy." Mona rose and shut the door firmly on Mrs. Battcock. A minute more and she had got the seam of her left stocking accurately aligned, two minutes more and her hair was smooth again. She crammed into the bag all that Mrs. Battcock had spilt, and hurried down the stairs. Lord Kirkmabreck was sitting as she had left him, beside the hat-rack in the hall, staring blankly at the name, painted on ground-glass, of the obscure business which occupied that floor.

" I'm dreadfully sorry," she began.

" It's all right," he said. " I often have to wait. Where shall we go? "

" Well, I wondered "—here she caught her breath a little—" whether *you* wouldn't come with *me* to the Bran Pie. You see, I'm a member and I generally go there."

" But I couldn't do that! " Lord Kirkmabreck was shocked into unfaltering speech. " I asked you to dine with me, didn't I? "

" Yes, you did." She hesitated, remembering what she had learnt, mostly from the sons of the cathedral close, of the way in which men think about clubs.

" I know," said the Earl suddenly. " If we go to the Bran Pie they'll have me as a member, won't they? "

" I'm sure they will," Mona said, slightly shocked at the suggestion that they might not.

" Well then, if you wouldn't mind . . . suppose I gave you the money—just to pay, you know—until I'm a member? "

Mona reflected. Why not? He had asked her to dinner, and, if they went to the Bran Pie, he would certainly be doing things on the cheap. She suspected that his supply of pocket-money was not very large and

she did not want to make too heavy a drain on it. "All right," she said, "give me half a crown for the guest fee and you can be a member in time to pay the dinner bill." Then, obeying who knows what sudden impulse, she flung her arms round him and hugged him.

She would have been ashamed of the impulse if she had not seen the look of happiness which spread over his face. That made her tuck her arm under his and hurry him out into the street. Then the obviousness of a cruising taxi saved her from saying anything until the flush had gone out of her cheeks and the indiscretion out of her breast. She was prim and circumspect all the way to Luck Alley, and he did nothing to make her otherwise.

She made him follow her up the stairs and said rather importantly to Bray: "Lord Kirkmabreck is my guest, but he wants to be a member. Will you tell Mr. Griffin that we want to see him as soon as he comes in?"

"Very good, miss," said Bray, taking the Earl's hat and stick. "As soon as the guv'nor comes in, I'll tell him."

Mona slipped across to the ministrations of Mrs. Badger. Apparently she looked excited, for Mrs. Badger said: "Sure you don't want an aspirin, miss? You're welcome, you know. Ladies often want 'em, so I keep a bottle ready, in case."

"No," Mona replied, "but I do need a little colour, don't I, Mrs. Badger? What do you think?"

"You look beautiful," said Mrs. Badger, "but I don't think a touch of pink would do any harm. But, oh, Miss Fenwick, what wouldn't some of the ladies here give for hair like yours!" Mona shook her red hair, patted it into place again, and looked prettier than ever, just because the cloakroom woman had said that. She returned to Bray's domain, collected the patient Earl, feeling as though she ought to give Bray a ticket for him, and took him up to the dining-room.

She had hoped to see no one who knew both of

them, but she was disappointed. George Bullace was loafing there, as though waiting for somebody, and approached before they had quite settled themselves at their table.

"Hullo, Kirkmabreck," he said; "hullo, Mona. Nasty night, isn't it?"

Until then, neither of them had been thinking about the weather. Bullace made them understand that there was a thunderstorm somewhere in the offing. They looked out through the narrow windows that gave on Luck Alley and saw that it could not be far off. Mona gasped and shivered.

"I hope it won't be very bad," she exclaimed. "They frighten me."

"You've got a gallant knight to defend you," Bullace said. "Crusading blood and Border forays, and all that sort of thing. You'll defend Mona against thunder and lightning, won't you, Kirkmabreck?"

"What's that? Er—oh, yes, of course," the Earl proclaimed doughtily.

"That's all right then. There she comes!" The first flash glared in the windows and the thunder followed heavily. "See you later." George's white teeth were displayed in a little grin as he left them.

"What would you like for dinner?" asked the Earl, scanning the menu with puzzled eyes.

Mona told Lord Kirkmabreck that she would leave it to him.

He put the menu down. "I say," he asked plaintively, "must you call me that?"

"What am I to call you, then?"

"My friends usually call me Kirkie—the cheerful ones, I mean. Gladys and Emily always call me Gordon."

"Who is Emily?"

"My mother-in-law. She likes us to call her Emily," said the Earl without enthusiasm.

"Haven't you any other name?"

"Haven't I? You take your choice. Gordon William

David Henry—no, sorry, as you were—Henry David Alaric. Don't laugh at them all, Mona, will you?"

"I won't," she promised, and her face was perfectly grave. "But which am I going to call you? Something that nobody else does. May I? Would you mind?"

"I wish you would," he said, and indeed he looked fatuously gratified.

"William—Henry—David—Alaric." She repeated them slowly and seriously. "William, no—Henry, no—David . . . I like David—Alaric . . . too difficult to say. David. Shall I call you David, David?"

He beamed at her. "Will you really?"

The waitress, who had been standing at their elbows throughout this conversation, now picked up the menu from under David's nose and ostentatiously replaced it.

"Oh, yes," he said with an air of discovery, "er—what shall we have?"

The lightning stabbed again, the thunder came quicker on its heels, and, after the thunder, the rush of a torrential rain. A wild wet gust of air flung itself through an open window on the other side of the room, blowing the tablecloths askew, and the waitress hurried to shut it out. Mona trembled, and Kirkmabreck put his hand comfortingly over hers. When they wanted the waitress again, she had evidently given them up as a bad job.

Down below Bray was saying to Mrs. Badger: "There won't be much for us to do to-night."

"Those that do come," said Mrs. Badger, "will all be wanting to change their stockings in my room. *And* grumbling because I can't help them all to do up their suspenders at the same time."

"You don't say, Mrs. Badger," Bray observed majestically, as though interested to learn that his colleague had her own troubles.

"Yes," she replied, "those that want to come *will* come, and they bring a change of stockings with 'em. You'd never believe what a lot of varicose veins I have to see on a night like this. They all ought to be operated on," she added vindictively.

Mona was still nervous, even through a lull in the storm, and found herself unable to eat. She therefore accused the *tournedos* of being tough.

"Is it?" the Earl murmured absently. He was too much occupied in cherishing her and protecting her against the terrors of the lightning to notice what he was eating.

They were still playing with their food when Horace Griffin presented himself. "I got your important message, Mona," he said, "and I hastened to your side. Introduce me to the House of Lords, will you? We've got no prejudice against peers here, though we don't encourage them. In my experience they usually wear white waistcoats and dinner jackets."

"Mr. Griffin, our secretary—Lord Kirkmabreck," Mona said formally. Horace nodded an easy acknowledgement. It occurred to her to add: "He's a friend of Sir Maurice Blabey's."

"Then he's a member," Horace told them. "Right away. Don't you worry, my lad, I'll fix that at once. You can even pay the bill openly instead of slipping the money to Mona under the table, which was what you meant to do. I'll send Carlo to you."

And Carlo came after Horace had nodded himself away, very courteous and obliging, and anxious to reserve a table downstairs for his lordship. Horace might be offhand about it, but Carlo knew very well that lords did not come to the Bran Pie every night. He had visions of rising and of becoming one of those head-waiters whom the great in the land delight to call their friends. Mona was pleased by his attitude and smiled kindly upon him.

"Yes—a table—er, yes, please do," said his lordship, and Carlo writhed away, rubbing his hands together.

The music began below, and at once there was the faint slithering noise which meant that two or three couples had taken the floor.

Mona looked over the balcony rail. "Half empty,"

she said. "Only the old habituals here. I'm one of them, I suppose."

"Do you mean you're always here?" asked the Earl.

"Most nights," said Mona. "Where else should I go?"

"I mean—I might find you any time when I dropped in?"

"I expect so."

"Come on down," said the Earl, "to that table."

The dance room was, in fact, unusually empty. The storm had caught too many members of the Bran Pie just unwrapping the food they had taken home from as many delicatessen shops, and had made them say that an early night would not do them any harm.

The Telluses, arms round one another's shoulders, were in their little cupboard of a kitchen when it began, debating whether their meal should be a haddock simmered in milk or the difficult and doubtful adventure of a buck rabbit. Harry wanted to go to the Bran Pie, and was therefore on the side of the haddock. Huffy inclined to an evening at home, and so challenged her husband to display his notorious skill with the rabbit while she poached the eggs. They were still in debate, the haddock lying in an attitude of depressed indifference on the diminutive kitchen-table before them, when the rain began to churn the dust of Rutland Terrace.

"All right," said Harry, "you win. Get out the cheese." He went into the sitting-room and tuned in to Toulouse.

Bertha always played most vigorously when the Bran Pie was not as full as it might have been. She was striking her loudest chord when Mona and Kirkmabreck entered the dance-room, and the storm got to work again directly overhead. Mona shivered into her partner's arms and he steered her out upon the sparsely populated floor. The thunder went on, with claps every two or three minutes.

"It's all right," said Kirkmabreck, "it won't hurt us."

"I know it's all right," Mona whispered angrily in

his ear, " and I know it won't hurt us. I'm just frightened, that's all. When one's frightened, what *is* the good of saying there's nothing to be frightened of? "

" I'm sorry," he said plaintively. But he soon found that he had not estranged her. The thunder exploded again, simultaneously with a flash that seemed to dim all the lights in the room, and she instantly drooped upon him with a soft, affecting intake of the breath. He halted and saw that she was trembling violently.

" Mona . . . Mona darling? " he exclaimed in agitation, " what's the matter? Are you all right, darling? "

" I—I want to sit down," she murmured.

He led her to their table with one unashamed, protecting arm about her, and a look of dawning pride that coloured the solicitude on his face. He placed her in a chair and stood over her, patting her shoulder several times.

" What you need," he said comfortingly, " is a drop of brandy." And he ordered it for her and stood over her in a masterful way while she drank it.

She looked up at him with a grateful smile. " I'm better now," she said, " but I wish it would stop. I'm very silly, aren't I? Do you despise me? "

He tried to assure her that he liked her better than ever but did not know how to go about it. Her trembling grew less, and presently she suggested that they should dance again.

That, the Earl—or David—said, was what he was there for. Perhaps it was David, for they had not been twice round the floor when Mona realized that he was clasping her with anxious determination to his breast. She took no alarm from this advance. She felt too much relief in the cessation of the thunder and in the presence of someone who would hold her hand if it returned. And her natural gaiety was enough to keep the conversation going with a companion who had not much to say for himself.

They were just seated again, while Bertha enjoyed a rest and a chat with her friends, when the storm

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returned in earnest. One grumbling mutter at a distance was followed, after a second's interval, by a clap that seemed not overhead but between their heads. Mona was convinced that it, not her hand, had overturned the glass of white coffee on their table.

Fortunately for both of them the emptiness of the club created an unnatural atmosphere in which it was possible to behave rather oddly without attracting attention. The few persons who were present seemed to be taking a holiday from their usual habits. No one wanted to dance. Bertha sat idle at the keyboard. Her friends clustered around her but were silent. Horace Griffin, stalking through the room with a long clay pipe in his hand, neither admonished them nor demanded more music. Mona, having allowed the Earl's arm round her waist, put her head on his shoulder and gasped into his collar at every peal. The Earl supported the burden with fortitude but looked perplexed. He was not afraid of thunderstorms himself, but no woman had ever before relied on him in an emergency or taught him how to exploit it. He held Mona up and wished he only knew.

The worst of the storm was the last. It vanished like a bubble, all its terrifying energies dispersed into shapes that could no longer terrify anyone. Mona raised her head from her companion's shoulder and looked as though she did not understand how it had ever been there. She stared at herself disapprovingly in the mirror of her hand-bag and rejected the idea of repairs on the spot.

"My eye-black," she said, "is all over my face. I want to go and wash it off. May I, David?"

"What . . . what?" The Earl blinked at her. These words and the tone in which they were uttered were unfamiliar to him.

"Will you," Mona asked, "let me go to Mrs. Badger's room and wash the eye-black off my face?"

"Why . . . why. . . ." He started, stuttering, to his feet, and moved his chair and hers and the table so that she might have an unimpeded passage. He felt

that he would have moved a mountain if there had happened to be one in the way. Nobody that he could remember had ever before seriously asked him for permission to do anything.

As soon as she had gone, he beckoned a waiter and ordered a double whisky and soda. When the waiter came back, Horace Griffin was at his heels. The waiter put down the whisky, and was about to empty the soda-water into it, when Horace stopped him.

" Take that away," said Horace grimly. " Throw it out of some window or other and throw yourself after it. Don't you know better than to bring an open bottle of sodawater to the table? "

" It doesn't matter," the Earl said with a nervous grin. But the waiter had already scurried away.

" I know it doesn't," said Horace, " but we must have discipline. They must open bottles at the table, even if the stuff goes all over you. May I sit down? "

" Do—do." The Earl stirred uneasily in his chair and did not come to rest until Horace was seated.

Horace regarded the Earl and said nothing for several moments. Then he suddenly planked a white square of paper on the table between them. " Sign that," he ordered, as though he were firing a shot into the nobleman's midriff.

Lord Kirkmabreck did not like signing anything. It was an action that Emily performed usually and Gladys sometimes. He himself did it only in the presence, and on the instructions, of the white-haired gentleman whom he had known from earliest childhood as Mr. Whithorn, Whithorn, Whithorn, and Macalaster. Both Emily and Gladys were always very portentous about it, and had sought to make him understand what a serious action it was. There was, for example, an obscure process called " signing away." Emily had had an aunt in Lancashire who had signed away something very important, to her own detriment and the great annoyance of her nephews and nieces, though Lord Kirkmabreck had never been quite able to understand what it was.

"Don't worry," said Horace with cheerful impatience. "It's only a membership form. But anyway you can just sign it quite safely, because there isn't anything written on it yet, you see."

"Oh, I see," said Lord Kirkmabreck gratefully. He produced the gold fountain-pen which Emily had given him on his twenty-eighth birthday and wrote "Kirkmabreck," with a careful flourish underneath, at the bottom of the form.

"Now you're a member," said Horace, rising and lounging away, only to encounter Mona, who returned with lips, cheeks, and lashes all exactly as they should be.

"What have you been saying to David?" she asked. The end of the storm had thrown her into a state of high nervous elation.

"There, my child, he's signed a membership form. You'd like him to be a member, wouldn't you?"

"If he wants to be."

Horace leant forward and gave her a smacking buss on the lips. "So much for you," he said. "You're the recruiting sergeant, you are."

She sat down by the Earl, displaying a colour not wholly explained by her sojourn in Mrs. Badger's room. "I couldn't help that," she whispered. "Horace doesn't mean any harm. You aren't angry with me, David, are you?"

Lord Kirkmabreck was much more touched by her humility than outraged by Horace's behaviour. He was positively on the edge of saying something important when Bertha clattered into the beginning of a fox-trot.

"Would you like to dance this?" said Lord Kirkmabreck with quaint formality to Miss Fenwick. They danced it, and Mona really enjoyed herself on the almost empty floor. He was one of those useful men who can follow a woman while pretending to lead her. Mona led him round and round and liked him more at every circuit. She breathed in Bertha's ear as they passed not to stop but to go on and on. Bertha grinned at her with malicious sympathy and went on and on.

When the music stopped at last, Mona's colour was high and her eyes were shining. Horace appeared from nowhere at their table, and threw the membership form down in front of her.

" I've filled that in," he said. " You'd better vet it, Mona."

She looked at it and learned that Lord Kirkmabreck had been proposed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and seconded by the Archbishop of York.

" If it amuses you, Horace," she said.

" It does," Horace assured her. " Here, I say, what about some fresh air? " Without waiting for an answer, he crossed the room and opened several windows. Rain-heavy air came in and softened the acrid breath of tobacco-smoke and human exhalations.

Mona sniffed at it appreciatively and said to the Earl: " I'm longing for an open taxi. Will you take me home in one, David? "

" I will indeed," said the Earl, standing up at once. She had not meant him to take her at her word so soon, and was a little puzzled by his promptness. He could not, surely, have grown suddenly bored by her? But they were outside in Luck Alley before she had quite grasped that they had moved. Then they were going towards Shaftesbury Avenue, and the Earl's left hand had possession of her right and his little finger was gently stroking her palm through the opening of her glove.

The sudden freshness of the air made her dizzy and drowsy. They went through a narrow passage where a party of roisterers forced them off the pavement. Then they were in Shaftesbury Avenue, and he was stopping a taxi.

" Put your hood down," he was saying fiercely, as though he expected the driver to object. She entered and slumped into a corner while the hood was still being lowered. She heard, but with so little distinctness that it was quite fair to pretend that she had not, the Earl's order to the driver to go round Regent's Park. He got

in beside her and, under the lights of Piccadilly, he gathered her clumsily into his arms.

" Do you love me, David? " she murmured, and he murmured back that he did. She felt very sleepy, she felt that she wanted to have someone's arms round her, someone making a fuss of her. He clutched her, and the nervous eagerness of his caresses was flattering and soothing. Then she realized that he was saying something.

" Can I—did you mean—I mean . . . can I come home with you? "

" You can't do that," she answered, shaking her head drowsily. " You must think of something else."

Kirkmabreck released her, sat bolt upright, and seemed to be thinking intensely. She watched him through half-closed eyes and almost thought him a figure in a dream. Apparently he came to some conclusion, for he leant out of the cab and gave a hurried order. When he sank back to her side, he clutched her again but did not look her in the face. She did not care. She did not trouble to look where the cab was taking them. Her boats were burnt and now the escapade must go on. David was a nice, kindly little chap—and attentive to her—and really and truly an Earl—and she felt almost motherly towards him.

The next thing she knew was that the cab had stopped and that he was hurrying her out of it and across the pavement into a discreetly lighted doorway. There he paused, for a moment at a loss, and she had time to look dazedly about her. They stood in a narrow, soft-carpeted passage under a steel engraving of Landseer's " The Monarch of the Glen." The passage led into a larger hall where a palm in a tub partly concealed from her a reception desk of almost blatantly discreet appearance behind which sat a stout, blonde woman of quite blatant respectability. From somewhere beyond came a subdued murmur of voices which filled her with alarm.

Kirkmabreck opened a door marked " Private " at her elbow and thrust her into a dark room. He switched

on the light, gasped: " I won't be a moment," and left her, shutting the door behind him.

She was suddenly wide awake and found that she was trembling more violently than during the storm. To prevent herself from thinking, she examined the room. There were more steel engravings of the Landseer period on the walls. There were leather chairs and a divan and an oval table, covered with a cloth, on which stood a silver bowl of roses. There was a writing-table of the sort which looks as though no one had ever sat at it to write anything but a dry and hasty postcard. She looked at the note-paper which displayed the address: " Carver's Hotel, Murray Street, W." She had never heard of Carver's Hotel before, but, for some reason that she could not have explained, this made her blush hotly, until she felt that not only her cheeks but her neck and her shoulders under her dress were unbecomingly stained.

She had recovered enough by the time that Kirkmabreck returned to be secretly amused by his quivering hands and damp forehead. She could see that he had been going through a severe trial of nerves and courage.

" Come on," he said hoarsely, " it's all right." She passed through the door which he held open for her and he guided her with a hand on her waist into the hall. The stout woman was waiting for them at the foot of the stairs.

" This way, madam," she said in a calm and friendly voice.

Mona was at once embarrassed and relieved. These people understood the technique and she had only to follow their lead. Nevertheless, she found that she could not look at the stout woman when, at the end of a long corridor, she threw open a door for them and pleasantly wished them good night. She saw that pyjamas and a night-dress had been placed on the bed and that there were brushes on the dressing-table.

Kirkmabreck stuttered for both of them: " Good night, Mrs. Hunt."

"Good night, sir," the woman answered, with an emphasis on the "sir" to show that she respected the name he had written in the register.

The door closed on them and she found that she could not look at Kirkmabreck either. "I feel so sticky," she said, averting her face. "I must have a wash."

"They've put running water in all the rooms here," said the Earl proudly.

Then Mona began to laugh, and she laughed and laughed, until everything was matter of fact between them again and happiness recovered.

III

The thunderstorm that pushed Mona Fenwick, not too unwilling, into the arms of the twelfth Earl of Kirkmabreck was the same that ravaged Potham and swept up the river, disturbing Euan Cartaret's night and imperilling his hopes for the coming day. Euan had settled again to a heavy-lidded sleep at the moment when Mona woke and found herself in a strange bed with the twelfth Earl's head near her shoulder.

He was, to a woman with very feminine instincts, attractive in sleep. The foolishness of his profile was softened into innocence. His closed eyes and his slightly open mouth looked very young rather than merely wantwitted. His quiet breathing suggested a mind that could never know anything of self-reproach. Mona moved very gently and he suffered himself to be turned over on to his other side without more than a briefly and unconsciously whispered "Darling . . ."

She got out of the bed and saw from a huge decorated clock, which stood under a glass shade on the mantelpiece, that it was a quarter to six. The thick carpet felt strange under her bare feet. She touched her clothes, thrown all higgledy-piggledy over the back of an armchair, to make sure that they were really there. She washed in the famous running water and dressed at

leisure, hoping that David would wake up of his own accord to say good-bye to her.

But he did not, slowly as she moved, and by the time that she had finished, it was nearly half-past. She put on her hat with great deliberation, pulling it this way and that and observing the effect in the glass on the dressing-table. Still he did not shift from the position in which she had so tenderly placed him, and the minute-hand moved on to the half-hour. Then, fully dressed, and at all points ready for the street, she bent over him and put her mouth ever so gently to his mouth. He stirred without turning over and pulled one arm in an ill-fitting pyjama sleeve from under the bed-clothes. She put it back again, pulled the sheets up to his chin and kissed him once more, gently, on the cheek. He muttered something in a bubbling way and she halted for a moment in the hope that he was really waking up. But he did not and she went on tiptoe out of the room.

The unlit corridor was shadowy and disquieting, but the staircase was full of what seemed to Mona to be premature daylight. She paused on it with sudden misgivings, then went on, impelled by the panic that leads to rapid action. She need not have alarmed herself. A sleepy-eyed man in a green baize apron moved a dustpan from the bottom stair with an apology, and the night-porter held open the door, yawning benevolently his "Good morning, miss." No one ever got into Carver's without good credentials. They might, therefore, go out as they pleased.

Mona was safely outside in Murray Street, but nervous and unstrung. She turned aimlessly to her right and walked a hundred yards before a crawling taxi offered her refuge. She had felt that every one of those blank windows, behind none of which was there, in fact, a waking eye, was watching her and noting her for future reference. But, once she was in the taxi, and away from Murray Street, her mind was at rest again. She had often before come home from parties as late as this. There was nothing for Mrs. Williams to suspect—

nothing, at any rate, that she might not, and sometimes justly, have suspected already. Mona crept up to her room, pulled her clothes off and got into a dressing-gown, certain that to-day at least she would be locked in the bathroom before Mrs. Battcock could get there.

Later on she took a positive delight in giving Mrs. Battcock shamefully insincere assurances through the bathroom door while she rubbed herself down with luxurious slowness.

"Can I come in, dear," said her neighbour, "and get my bath going while you're finishing?"

"I shan't be long," said Mona cheerfully, wrapping her towel round her.

There was a sound which indicated that Mrs. Battcock had settled down on the mat to await admission.

"I'm feeling a little low this morning," said Mrs. Battcock through the door.

Mona, passing her hands caressingly down her sleek, damp sides, murmured her sympathy.

"I heard from Mr. Battcock last night. His plans haven't come off and that means he'll not be able to come to London after all. And, by the way, Miss Fenwick, I shall be free any night now if you want to go to the pictures."

So Mona hurried a little and resigned the bathroom to Mrs. Battcock. What else was there that she could do?

CHAPTER IX

NOW OR NEVER

I

MR. PRATZ sat scribbling idly but thoughtfully on a very small block of paper, which lay on an immense rosewood writing-table, when his partner entered. The table itself looked as small in the middle of a vast extent of rich carpet. Sir Maurice stood in the cyclopean doorway like a character making his entrance in a Greek tragedy produced by Mr. Gordon Craig.

"Are you busy, Joseph?" he asked, from that distance. "Is this your morning for thinking?"

"I'm thinking, Maurice," Mr. Pratz replied with a peculiar intonation, "but I hoped I should see you. In fact I was just going to telephone for you."

"I thought I'd better come up and have a look round." Sir Maurice sat in one of the enormous leather arm-chairs that completed the furnishing of the room. "But I can tell you, it was hard to leave the country on a morning like this. I was tempted to stay pottering in the gardens and replanning them for next year. There's a lot to be done to them yet." He settled himself more comfortably, put one knee over the other, and drew out his cigar-case. "Yes, I like the country more and more as I grow older. I've moved about a good bit but I believe Potham will be my last house. I love the place. Do you know, Joseph, that I shall be fifty-seven next year? When this deal is finished . . ." He began with luxurious deliberation to cut through the end of his cigar.

Mr. Pratz tapped an irregular rhythm on the table with his pencil. "Maurice," he said at last, "there was a letter from Glossop this morning."

"Yes?" The first bluish curl of smoke slid through the air between them.

"He won't agree to anything but the whole sum in cash."

"What do you say?" Sir Maurice sat upright, and the cigar, loosely held between his fingers, pointed at the floor.

"Just that."

"But I thought . . . I mean, we both felt sure that he was coming round."

"He was. But I'm afraid, Maurice—I'm very much afraid that something has happened. You see . . . he not only wants cash, he wants a deposit on the nail."

"How much does he want?"

"A third. We might—we *might* beat him down to a quarter."

"But that's impossible!" Sir Maurice was indignant. "Even a quarter is impossible with all our commitments."

"I know that," said Mr. Pratz without emotion.

Sir Maurice began to walk up and down with long strides, apparently studying the pattern of the carpet. At the end of the beat he was almost out of earshot of his partner. After some moments he said: "What do you make of it?"

"Someone," Mr. Pratz replied, twisting his lips a little to one side, "is saying things we'd rather not have said. The Vallonian issue is being crabbed in advance. I know that for a fact. I've heard one or two things that I wasn't meant to hear."

"But who? And why?"

"Oh . . . you know how it is," Mr. Pratz shrugged his shoulders. "No one in particular and a number of people in general. Do you remember, Maurice, that first day we lunched together? At the Savoy, wasn't it, or the Ritz—I forget which. One of us said to the other,

I don't remember even which of us it was, that it might be a good thing to keep clear of poor Sacheverell's companies. Poor Sacheverell! Do you remember he had a large party and wanted us to join him?" Mr. Pratz bit his lower lip and tapped his irregular rhythm on the table. "We talked it over and by the time we'd finished we were both quite certain that we didn't like the look of him. I expect that afterwards we both said the same thing to other people—I know I did. For all we can tell, we may have been the first to set the trouble going. And what is Sacheverell doing now?"

"Picking oakum, I suppose, or whatever it is they make those chaps do."

"Binding books, I believe, the last I heard of him. That's what they generally set you to do if you're well educated and have soft hands."

Sir Maurice shivered a little. "Well, we're not in his position," he said energetically. "I take it that what you mean is that there's talk going about?" Mr. Pratz nodded. "Bad talk, that'll make money hard to come by?" Mr. Pratz nodded again.

Sir Maurice resumed his walking up and down. "You're quite sure," he said over his shoulder, "that nothing can be done with Glossop?"

"Quite sure. Believe me, Maurice, I've studied him closely and this time he means what he says. We might beat him down a little, but . . ." Mr. Pratz shrugged his shoulders.

Sir Maurice turned and halted and the partners were face to face. "What about old Bullinger?" Sir Maurice asked.

"Lord Bullinger is not a—not a very courageous man at best, is he? If we ask any more of him, he will smell a whole—um, surely, Maurice, there must be a noun of assembly for rats?"

"Damn your nouns of assembly! I'm afraid you're right, Joseph. The Bullingers and the Hopes are only with us conditionally. They can still get out, after a fashion, if they're frightened."

"There's no surer way of frightening them than to ask them for more money."

"Damn the Bullingers! And damn the Hopes!"

"I always call them the forlorn Hopes," Mr. Pratz observed pleasantly.

"A good joke, but it won't help us," Sir Maurice grumbled. He seemed, however, to be slightly encouraged by it. "That fellow Bullinger ought not to be in control of so much money, let alone a great productive business. He's an old woman and his place is at the wash-tub. Look here, Joseph, if you're not making any mistake about it, this means that the whole scheme falls through."

"And that, of course, means that the Vallonian issue will be affected," supplemented the ever gentle-voiced Mr. Pratz. He executed with care several whorls and flourishes on his writing-pad. "And that means . . ." he went on.

"I know very well what it means." Sir Maurice threw out his large, soft hands in a prodigality of gesture that was unusual with him. "We shall have to shut up shop, shan't we? And God knows what else we shall have to shut up. Joseph, tell me, are our schemes sound or are they not?"

"I think they are perfectly sound."

"Will they do good or will they not?"

"I think they will do good."

"But they are going to fail because Glossop is an obstinate old fool and Bullinger is a timid old fool and people have been talking?"

"I hope they will not, Maurice, I do most sincerely hope they will not."

"Have you got any ideas then?"

"I have *an* idea. I have been working at it all the morning. You can see how hard I have been working." He held up his writing-pad which was now completely covered with intricate pencilled designs. "Perhaps, if anyone really understood the workings of the mind, he could read those and tell you what my idea is. They

must have a meaning. There must be some reason why there I drew a polygon and there a series of concentric circles." He surveyed his scribbles with an air of scientific detachment.

" Don't tease me, Joseph," said Sir Maurice, petulant but more hopeful. " What do you think we can do? "

Mr. Pratz hesitated. " It is not finished yet," he said. " I shall have to fill at least another sheet. No, seriously, my dear fellow, I don't want to talk about it until I have thought it out to the end. When can I see you again? "

Sir Maurice was quite willing to see Mr. Pratz again whenever Mr. Pratz liked. " Phyllis sacrificed herself and came up to keep me company. But no doubt she can find friends to amuse her."

Apparently not—for a secretary came in to say that Miss Blabey had called for her father.

" Ask her to come in here," said Mr. Pratz, standing up quickly. " This is a delightful surprise, Maurice."

Phyllis came into the doorway—swinging skirts, and a light fur to indicate that the first touch of autumn had already chilled the air. She halted, as though on unfamiliar ground, and looked from her father to his partner.

" This is so nice," said Mr. Pratz, going towards her. " Do please, my dear Phyllis, decorate my room just for one moment."

" I'm interrupting," she objected.

" And how beautifully! Please come in. I don't think we could manage a cocktail for you, but some sherry, now——"

" Daddy, may I have a glass of sherry? " She advanced across the room and seated herself on the corner of Mr. Pratz's enormous writing-table.

" When did I ever control your drinking, my dear? " Sir Maurice asked.

Mr. Pratz rang a bell and said to his secretary: " We have some sherry, haven't we? " He followed the young man to a cupboard in a corner of the room and added gently: " Sweet, for a lady, don't you think? Yes, the Manzanilla, please, Hoskins."

If Phyllis had heard this, she would have demanded a dry sherry. She did not hear. She took an absent-minded sip at the glass that was put into her hand, accepted the cigarette that Mr. Pratz offered her, and went on talking to her father.

"Can't you possibly come, Daddy?" she pleaded. "Barbara will be so dreadfully disappointed. It's really her very last night. She's taking the boat-train from Euston to-morrow morning and I don't want her to be lonely and brooding. I thought if you gave a party——"

"It depends on the time when Joseph will want me," her father replied.

"I shall know where to find you, shan't I?" said Mr. Pratz.

"Will you join us?"

Mr. Pratz shook his head. "I shall still be thinking. But when I have finished I shall know where to get in touch with you. Now, Maurice, if you will take my advice you will go away with your beautiful daughter and you will buy her a hat. And you will not think about anything serious until you hear from me again."

"Would you like a hat, Phyllis?"

"Not a hat exactly," Phyllis confessed. "But I do want to go to Elspeth's, and it would be great fun if you would come with me."

"Great fun and great expense, I don't doubt. Are you sure there's nothing I can do, Joseph? Very well. Come along, my love, and we'll buy something we can't afford. That's always a great solace."

They passed through the outer office, where the typists at their glass and metal tables glanced sideways at them, and between the rosewood panels of the corridor. The liftman was deeply respectful to Sir Maurice and his daughter, and so was the commissionaire. They were excessively helped into Sir Maurice's London car which began to make spasmodic progress through the traffic of the City.

"Well, my dear," said Sir Maurice, "who is coming to your party?"

"Babs, of course, and I've told her to get hold of George. That reminds me—I must ring Euan. He'd like to come. And then I expect other people will join up as we go along."

"I dare say they will." Sir Maurice was not unaccustomed to other people joining up when he gave a party.

The car laboriously made its way round St. Paul's, and there was a silence between father and daughter.

The father broke it at last by saying: "My dear, I want to ask you something."

"Yes, Daddy. . . . I say, Daddy, what's that figure over there? The one that looks as if it was holding a pair of scales?"

"It *is* holding a pair of scales—and a sword. That's the figure of Justice on the Old Bailey, my child—a place where criminals walk downstairs from the dock after being sentenced, and so to Wormwood Scrubbs. A very queer sensation it must be. But I was saying . . ."

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"Have you ever thought of marrying anyone?"

At first the father thought that he had shocked his daughter by the suggestion. But, when he looked at her again, it seemed that she was only turning it over in her mind and considering what answer she should make. He found this somehow disquieting. It was, of course, inevitable that Phyllis should marry one day, and it was right that he, as her only responsible parent, should talk to her about it. But he wished that she could have said at once that no such thought had ever entered her mind—although he had spoken because the thought had entered *his* mind that it might be a good thing if she were safely married.

The car was going down Ludgate Hill when she murmured: "One must think about it, mustn't one?"

He persisted, in spite of a slight feeling of chill. "Is there anyone you would like to marry?"

"I don't think there is." And there was more meaning in those words than she could convey or he

could perceive. But they were offered lingeringly enough to make him curious.

"I shan't be—what would you call it?—stuffy, my darling."

"I don't think you would be, Daddy. Anyway, I'd tell you if . . . but there isn't anything to tell."

He had been prepared to hear her confess that she had made a choice. He had expected to hear her say that the idea was strange to her. But this cool uncertainty threw him into a state of vague apprehension. She had considered, she was still considering, the claims of some suitor whose name he did not dare to ask. He said no more, and the car went on until it drew up outside the door of Elspeth et Cie.

The shop was somnolent. It was the slack season and no customers were expected. But Miss Walton sprang into life as they entered. She had seen Phyllis before, but Sir Maurice was new to her.

"We still have the little frock you liked so much the other day, madam," she said alertly.

"What's that? Let me see it, please." For Sir Maurice suddenly felt that there was nothing he wouldn't do to give his daughter pleasure—or, if he could, to make her contented.

Miss Walton was already bringing out the flimsy thing, which shimmered on her arm in gleams of cerise and blue. Sir Maurice wondered who invented women's dresses, wondered for a moment whether this were not an industry into which also common sense might be introduced.

"How much is it?" he asked, and smiled as he asked, since Miss Walton in her beaky way was quite a pretty girl.

"Twenty guineas, sir," she replied, making one of the miscalculations inevitable in her business.

"You said fifteen last week," Phyllis interposed. "And that's too much. What do you think of it, Daddy?"

"I think it's worthy of you," he pronounced solemnly,

"But I agree that we should get it for as little as possible. Now, come, young lady, tell me your rock-bottom price."

Miss Walton, taken by surprise, revealed her innermost thoughts and admitted that thirteen guineas would be adequate. "I could have kicked myself," she said afterwards to the second sales, in whose eyes her prestige had suffered. "You're quite right—he'd have paid fifteen like a lamb. It was her being his daughter that rattled me. They don't often come like that."

"Thirteen it is," said Sir Maurice. "Go and put it on." Phyllis went away and presently came back, brilliant in cerise and blue. She paraded seriously before him.

"But for whom *really*?" he said to himself as he told Miss Walton to send him the bill.

No matter—he had carried out Joseph's instructions. He had given Phyllis pleasure and he felt better for it, just as Joseph had known that he would.

"Keep it on," he said. "I want to take you out to lunch like that."

"We can send the other dress home, sir," said Miss Walton obligingly.

"Of course you can," Phyllis remarked. "By the way, Daddy, I must ring Euan before he goes out. Can I 'phone from here?" she asked of the air in general rather than of Miss Walton in particular.

"Certainly, madam."

She was shown into the little office at the back, where Mona Fenwick was pondering deeply and gloomily over figures that would not please Mr. Rosenberg.

"Miss Blabey would like to use the telephone," said Miss Walton, retiring.

Mona tried to remember that this was a customer, not just someone whom she had seen at the Bran Pie and to whom she had taken a dislike. It did not occur to Phyllis to think of herself as anything but a customer. Mona vacated her table, received a little nod in return, and wondered whether she ought to go out of the room. But she did not go.

Through the door came the cheerful murmur of Sir Maurice's voice, punctuated by little bursts of refined and restrained giggling. He was making himself agreeable to Miss Walton and the second sales.

"Bunyan 2153," said Phyllis. Then—"Can I speak to Mr. Cartaret?" A long pause. "Is that you, Euan? . . . What? . . . This is Phyllis speaking. . . . Yes, Phyllis. . . . I didn't mean to surprise you. Have I interrupted you? Have you got something on the stove that's going to boil over?" She laughed, a charming, friendly little laugh. "Listen, Euan, Daddy's giving a party for Barbara to-night. . . . You needn't come if you don't want. . . . Yes, of course, we want to have you. . . . Don't be silly, Euan. Do you think you're Royalty or what? . . . Well, come or not just as you like. . . . Very well, then, don't come." She put the receiver back with a vicious little movement.

Mona turned away to hide an involuntary smile, of which she felt ashamed. Phyllis walked past her into the shop, pausing at the door to offer ill-tempered thanks for the use of the telephone. Miss Walton and the second sales resumed their business faces as she entered, and Sir Maurice said: "Well, is your young man coming?"

"He's booked up," she answered briefly. "Where are we going to lunch?"

They lunched very expensively and very deliberately in a restaurant that seemed to be full of Sir Maurice's acquaintances. One after another came to their table and, save for a few words of bantering compliment to her, talked in language that meant nothing to Phyllis. For the first time in her life her ignorance troubled her. "Five and three-eighths this morning," said one gentleman with a grimace that disturbed the glossiness of his appearance, and Sir Maurice answered with a lift of the eyebrows that was evidently full of meaning. Phyllis inwardly resolved that she would learn what this and all the other strange terms meant, so that she could be a really helpful companion to her father.

They were lingering over the end of their meal, she generously urging him to drink another brandy, when a short, swarthy old man with bent shoulders hobbled rapidly past them. Sir Maurice made a special effort to catch his eye and succeeded, but got only a grunt and a brusque lift of the hand in return.

"Who was that, Daddy?"

"That was old Glossop, my love. I rather wanted . . ." He half rose in his seat, as though to pursue the receding figure, then thought better of it, sat down again, and ordered another brandy.

II

Phyllis's telephone call came at an unfortunate time for Euan. Mr. Magsley had dropped in on him with his most deceptive air of idleness and was lounging in the arm-chair, being discursive about everything. It pleased him to talk of his experience among the heaven-born much as a newly translated spirit talks about the next world by rocking a table or through the mouth of a medium—though he displayed, perhaps, less anxiety to be believed.

Euan was principally anxious to point out to him that they were barking up the wrong tree with their Bx. solution, which he had been called back from Potham to superintend. He had in fact conceived a bitter prejudice against that solution. It wasn't going to work, and while Mr. Magsley talked, he was restlessly arranging things on the bench to prove that it never would. Then the bell rang and he was indeed surprised to find that it was Phyllis.

He said: "Who's that? I said—Who's that? . . . Phyllis? . . . What a surprise! . . . To-night? I don't know. . . . Do *you* want me to come? . . . Who's we? Who's going to be there? . . . It's no use if there's going to be a crowd of silly people and we can't . . . I don't really know what . . ." There was a click at the other

end of the line which even Mr. Magsley could hear, but for a moment or two longer Euan held the receiver to his ear with the foolish expression of one who knows that he has been left to hold it in vain.

Mr. Magsley had walked over to the bench and was gingerly tasting some of Euan's Bx. solution, having wetted his finger from the test-tube containing it. He ignored the elaborate array of apparatus which Euan had set out.

" Too weak," he said, and tipped the stuff down the sink. Euan scowled. " We must try again. . . . If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. That is our motto here. Your trouble, my dear boy, is that you are too much used to making one flight to your goal." It amused Mr. Magsley from time to time to address the patient Euan as though he were a wild and irresponsible genius. " That's what I told the heaven-born yesterday when I appealed to them to put you on the higher scale a year in front of your time—oh, I didn't tell you that they'd agreed to that, did I? "

Euan tried not to scowl. " That was awfully good of you," he muttered.

" We must reward inspiration sometimes," said Mr. Magsley, " and I thought you might find it useful."

Euan scowled again.

Mr. Magsley regarded him thoughtfully for a moment and went on: " I said to the assembled heaven-born, ' Don't imagine that I can ever control Cartaret's soaring imagination. Don't think that you can keep a mind like that inside the bounds of ordinary routine. Don't——' " He broke off and said: " By the way, it seems that I shall have to go to Vallonia. Or would you like to go instead of me? "

" Do you mean that? " Euan asked. He felt that he would be glad to go anywhere so long as it was away from familiar places.

" We might go together," Mr. Magsley suggested. " The Vallonian Government has to be duped by someone, and we might as well make a little holiday of it."

" I'm ready," said Euan.

" With expenses," said Mr. Magsley, " on the heaven-born scale. Do you know, Euan, I believe that I am being corrupted? I stand aside and dispassionately watch my ideals giving way. I am almost prepared to assure those unfortunate innocent Vallonians that we can do their mountain railway better than the Germans."

Euan shrugged his shoulders. " We'd better make that trip together," said Mr. Magsley and, smiling, he walked out on his very long legs.

" I'm not going to do any more to-day," Euan said to himself. He began to tidy up his bench, brooding angrily. He was angry with Mr. Magsley for having poured the Bx. solution down the sink. He was angry with Phyllis for having rung him up, so airily, to invite him to a party in which he would not be able to talk to her alone. He was angry with himself for not being able to make up his mind to stay away from the party. He finished his tidying, took off his white laboratory jacket, put on his coat, and went out.

He passed through the factory and saw rows of girls in overalls, packing electric bulbs into cardboard cases. Their eyes were intent and their fingers flickered with a regular feverishness. He had never thought much about this side of the business before, but now he wondered whether any of these girls ever felt as he did to-day, too restless to go on with the appointed task. He stared at the faces and wondered whether behind the frowning masks there dwelt whims and moods and uncertainties as painful to other men as Phyllis's were to him. The thought made him wince and quicken his pace as though he had been spurred. But when he reached the door of a room whence came a glaring light, a small, eager man jumped out and stopped him.

" Just come and look a minute, Mr. Cartaret," he pleaded.

Euan went into the room where the blue prints were made.

" It's working a treat, sir," said the master of the

mysteries. "Beautiful prints we're turning out, since you put in that gadget of yours. His lordship looked in the other day and he wasn't half impressed."

Euan watched the prints being carried on the roller under the quartz lamp, for which, to please this little enthusiast, he had devised one or two improvements. There was something familiar about them. It came to him that Bullinger & Hope were getting ready to supply Vallonia with a mountain railway.

"Getting a lot of work just now?" he asked.

"Plenty, sir. There's a lot of big contracts in the offing, I hear. Going to be a great thing this amalgamation is. And the more work there is, the better I like it. Bit of overtime suits me just now."

"Hard up?" Euan suggested sympathetically. "Family expenses and all that?"

"Oh no, sir. It isn't the money. Not but what I can do with a bit to put in one of Sir Maurice Blabey's companies. And it isn't family expenses." He chuckled. "Funny thing, it's just because expenses have gone down that I can do with a bit of overtime."

He seemed to wish to be invited to explain, so Euan invited him.

"Well, you see, sir, my daughter got married the other day, so that's why the family expenses are down. But now when I go home at night my wife wants to talk to me. Twenty-three years she's talked to that girl and left me alone, and I'm out of the way of it. So it's a help if I go home late and a bit tired. Bridges over things, if you understand me, sir, till I get used to it again." He uttered another chuckle and whipped the finished print expertly off the roller. "There, look at that. I'd like to see any of those firms in Germany turning out a print half as good."

Euan passed on, skirted a battery of typewriters, clattering at full speed, but not so fast that some of the operators could not turn to look at him as he passed by, and reached the street. "Home," he thought to himself, and before there was time to change his mind,

boarded a bus. As soon as he had paid his fare he did change his mind, but he had not the resolution to put the change into effect. The bus jolted on through Islington and Holloway, carrying Euan towards his father's house in Highgate. There was a dull, heavy, foreboding sensation inside him and he did not know where to go to get rid of it.

His arrival was disconcerting. He found Lucy and Auntie Mabel having a turn-out. The hat-rack he was able to recognize under its shrouding dust-sheet, but it was surrounded by other pieces of furniture that he could not identify. Auntie Mabel, voluminously aproned, her hair swathed in a cloth, carrying a dustpan and a brush, came out of his father's study.

"Oh, it's you," she said in a faint voice. "I was afraid . . ."

Lucy came out after her. She too had her head covered and all the appearance of one engaged in strenuous work.

"You *would* come home to-day of all days," she said tartly. "Oh, well . . . I don't know, Euan—sometimes I wonder why you come home at all. You might easily go off and leave me to it. I shouldn't blame you. But there's no lunch for you—not what you would call lunch."

"Have you had it?"

"We were going to have a snack in the kitchen, so as not to waste time."

"Can't I have a snack too? Don't bother about me."

"You'll have to put up with what there is." But she and Auntie Mabel were already whipping the cloths off their heads. "Go along into the kitchen, Euan. It isn't too uncomfortable there, and we won't be long."

He went into the kitchen and was touched by trivial changes. There was new oilcloth on the floor. The calendar on the wall showed, instead of military heroes, two lovers in a romantic scene. There was still a chequered cloth on the table, but its colours were unfamiliar to him. He did, however, recognize the two

little china swans with little ferns in their backs and the large swan with a large fern. They seemed only to have changed their places.

When Lucy came down, she had got rid of her apron, put on a fresh frock, and powdered her nose. Euan would not in the ordinary way have noticed whether his sister had powdered her nose or not, but inexpert handling of the puff had left obvious traces on one cheek.

"We won't be long," she said again, and disappeared.

Auntie Mabel followed more sedately and began to lay the table.

"Can't I help?" Euan asked, jumping up.

"Oh, Euan," she said tremulously, "you wouldn't know how." It was perfectly true, but he did his best and pleased her more than he hindered her, which is saying a good deal.

Lucy was busy in the scullery, from which came intermittently a noise of popping and then a steadier sound of spluttering and hissing. The luncheon, when it was ready, consisted of a great heap of fried eggs and bacon and fried potatoes. Euan was certain that the two women, left to themselves, would never have had anything so much like real food.

He expanded and loved them both. "Here," he said, "let's celebrate. Isn't there still some of that wine in the cupboard?"

He was off to get it while Auntie Mabel was still protesting. When he came back with a bottle of Liebfraumilch, she was wiping three wine-glasses of different sizes and shapes. While he opened the bottle, she besought him not to let his lunch get cold.

When they began to eat, and the first excitement was over, an awkward silence fell. They knew nothing of his life, he little of theirs—and what little he knew he did not understand. He had ceased from going to the tennis-club and Lucy had abandoned her efforts to make him go. That had been the last topic of conversation between them—how many months past?

For the sake of saying something, he said rashly: " Don't you ever get tired of cleaning this house, Lucy? "

Auntie Mabel looked at her niece as though this touched on something recently mentioned between them.

Lucy visibly held her tongue for a moment, and when she spoke it was with a forced calm. " Would it surprise you," she asked, " to know that we do get tired of it sometimes? "

" That's what I meant," he said hastily, and busied himself with an egg.

" We all get tired of our work," Auntie Mabel ventured. " I expect Euan does now and again, don't you, Euan? "

Lucy had begun to glower.

" Of course I do," said Euan. He refilled Lucy's glass and his own, and chaffed Auntie Mabel because she had barely touched hers.

" It isn't that I don't like this nice wine, Euan, really it isn't," Auntie Mabel said, almost piteously. " But it doesn't agree with me. Please don't make me have any more."

The meal came to an end with Lucy still by turns glowering and trying to be cheerful.

" What are you going to do now, Euan? " she asked, when, in spite of his protests, they had collaborated in making coffee for him and had solemnly watched him drink it.

" I don't know." He did not know what had brought him home at such an hour or why he had taken so much pleasure in the meal in the kitchen with the two women. He felt an obscure desire to talk to someone about himself—and to whom, he thought, if not to his own sister? He poured out what little coffee remained in the pot and stared across the table at Lucy. She did not grow younger, he reflected. She was approaching thirty, and a stranger might have been pardoned for guessing that she had passed it. Faint but unmistakable lines of dissatisfaction were beginning to draw themselves round her eyes and her nostrils.

He found himself speculating on what she thought of her life, and what would make her think better of it. She had a job, he told himself—cleaning the house so that it might be soiled and then cleaned once more. Supposing she made a good marriage, by local standards, that was, what else would there be for her to do in a house of her own?

But she could not grow placidly into an elderly virgin as Auntie Mabel had done. Their father intolerably vexed her, and he, he admitted, was an unsatisfactory brother. She was captain of the women's team at the tennis-club, but sooner or later the younger generation would deprive her even of that. Phyllis? He tried to imagine Phyllis leading Lucy's life, but he could not fit them together in the same world. Why could he not? And then there was Mona Fenwick, whom he had seen once or twice lately with Kirkmabreck. It puzzled him that there should be so many different sorts of women.

He felt for an instant that by one great mental effort he could answer this question and at the same time solve Lucy's problem, that he might utter one word of advice which would make Lucy more like Phyllis or like Mona. He realized that he would not be thinking such thoughts if he were not growing drowsy. He was not used to eating heaps of eggs and bacon and drinking wine in the middle of the day.

"I shall take a chair and sit in the garden," he announced.

But he could not find the wicker chair he remembered as having once been kept in the cupboard by the back-door and he had to call Lucy back from her work. She produced a garden chair, a new one that he had not seen before, and cushions, and made him com-fortable with a clumsy tenderness that would have turned at once to resentment if he had remarked on it.

He was beginning to doze when she returned, carrying something gingerly between finger and thumb. "I don't see why you shouldn't have one of his cigars," she said.

Euan did not care much for cigars, and at that moment would rather have gone peaceably to sleep. But he sat up, lit the offering, and puffed at it with carefully displayed enthusiasm.

"I'll bring you some tea out here," she said, lingering. "Unless you'd like to come indoors and have it with us. . . ."

"I tell you what," he suggested, making his supreme effort. "Why don't you bring yours out here and have it with me? Auntie Mabel wouldn't mind, would she?"

"Shall I? Yes, I will. I'll tell her we've got business to talk about." It seemed to him that she went back to the house with a more contented stride.

The garden was parched and dirty after the hot summer. The grass was thin and yellowish. The pear tree at the bottom bore quantities of small hard fruit. The old man who came in once a week for half a day to tidy up did not run to the raising of flowers. Lucy's time or else her imagination, stopped at nasturtiums which flooded all the borders. Yet it was quiet, and there was still a certain greenness.

"I must spend more time here," Euan thought, "instead of running about with people who bore me." The cigar dropped from his lax fingers and he slept.

When he woke, uncomfortably conscious that his mouth had been open, and suspecting that he might have snored, Lucy was standing by him with a tray in her hands. He roused himself with difficulty and made to stand up, but she insisted that he should stay where he was.

"I'll sit on the grass," she said, and did so.

"If you like to call it grass," he mumbled grumpily. His tongue was dry and his eyes felt bleared, and he wished he had said that he would drink tea in the garden alone. Then he remembered that he had fallen asleep glowing in the consciousness of the day's good deed, and realized that the deed was not yet fully accomplished. It was not enough to have asked his sister to

have tea with him. He must both talk and listen to her. There was at any rate one subject on which it was easy to begin.

"Have you seen Father lately?" he asked. It occurred to him as he spoke that it was a rather absurd question, seeing that they all three lived in the same house.

But Lucy took it quite seriously. "He came in the other night," she replied, "while I was still up. He wasn't very pleased to see me, but I got two weeks' money out of him."

"Poor old girl," he sympathised. "Do you find him very trying? About money, I mean."

"Oh no." She shrugged her shoulders. "He always pays up when I can get hold of him at night. I could make him pay regularly if I sat up once a week till he came home. It's no use asking him in the morning." She paused, but kept her eyes on him as though there were something more she wanted to say. After a time she said it. "Euan," she asked, "why did you come home so early to-day?"

"I don't know. Why shouldn't I?"

"Of course you should, if you want. You pay your share, don't you? But I meant—I thought perhaps there was something you were going to tell me." He looked blank at this, and she went on hurriedly, dropping her eyes: "You see—after all, you'll be getting married some day, won't you?"

Suddenly the ache and the foreboding welled up in his heart, and it was on his tongue's edge to tell Lucy about Phyllis, how he longed for her, how small and failing was his hope of attaining her. Only his natural slowness of speech had prevented the impulse from becoming words before she went on again: "When you do, there won't be anything to keep me here, will there? Auntie Mabel has a little money, and she'd like to go back to Cambridge. And Father could sell the house or get a housekeeper or take in lodgers—or . . . or . . . well, do whatever he damned well likes."

" But what do you want to do? " Euan was positively a little alarmed. It was one thing for him to want to change the girl's probably drab future, quite another for her to make enterprising plans about it.

" I've got a little money of my own, too, you know. If I tried to get a job, I could afford to wait and pick and choose. I could take a little bed-sitting-room somewhere . . . something quite cheap . . . with a gas ring, so that I could cook most of my meals myself." A dreamy look came into her eyes as though she were imagining the earthly paradise.

" Oh no, not that," cried Euan, sitting bolt upright.

" Why not? "

" I've seen too many of them—the people that live in bed-sitting-rooms, I mean. It's a hell of a life."

" I should like it."

" Well, anyway, I'm not going to get married. What made you think of it? "

" I thought you might be," she said simply. " You remember that day when I was in the queue at the theatre and I saw you going past with Phyllis Blabey. I just thought to myself: " Euan wants to marry that girl '."

" But you only saw our backs."

" I know. But that's what I thought."

" Then you thought wrong," Euan answered, reverting to the idiom of their childhood.

The suppressed sulkiness in his voice made her thoughtful and a little unhappy but not angry. " It was only an idea, you know," she said. " I—I think she's a very nice girl. I don't suppose she'd like me much, but I'm sure she must be very nice. I know I was spiteful about her that night . . . I was sorry afterwards." This was an apology which cost Lucy an effort.

" She's quite good fun," said Euan guardedly. " But you mustn't go getting ideas like that into your head. You'll be thinking next that Father is going to marry again."

" He isn't quite old enough," she said, rising with a

sudden movement from the grass. "Do you want another cup? Auntie Mabel will think I've left her to do everything."

After she had gone, Euan lay where he was until it suddenly occurred to him that the air was growing a little chilly. He looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly seven. He jumped up and went indoors.

"What about dinner?" called an invisible Lucy, as she heard him going to his room. She had suspended the turn-out so early as to astonish Auntie Mabel, having made up her mind that Euan's dinner should not be such a scratch affair as his luncheon.

"Oh, don't bother about dinner for me," he called back to her. "I've got to go out and meet a man."

III

Barbara Lackland's farewell party began in the atmosphere of gloom which she imposed on it. No more melancholy creature ever sat down at table in the Bran Pie. She might, thought Sir Maurice, who urgently desired to be cheered up, be going to gaol instead of to America. Phyllis not only shared her sadness but also was annoyed and vaguely hurt because Euan had refused to come. It did seem, indeed, that not many persons cared very much whether Barbara went or stayed. This was a party of the sort that, for one reason or another, has no luck from the start. Like an overloaded air-plane it taxied dismally along and refused to leave the ground.

When it assembled it was an odd number, because Euan's place had not been filled after all. Somehow or other the people who were expected to join up as it went along had not even been seen. It had reached the third round of cocktails, and conversation was growing limp instead of boisterous, when Sir Maurice perceived Lord Kirkmabreck wavering through the doorway.

He executed a flanking movement, and the Earl was

brought to battle without a chance of either escape or victory. "Come along," cried Sir Maurice heartily, "we were just waiting for you. You got my telephone message, evidently," he said without remorse.

"No—no, I didn't," said the Earl. "Where did you send it?"

Sir Maurice did not answer this question. "Well, you've come without it," he said. "Good thing, eh? Otherwise we should have been an odd number. Now come along. Miss Lackland is a friend of yours, isn't she?"

"Does she remember me?" asked the Earl, looking scared. She had once sketched to him her reading of his inner life, and it had left him feeling as a man feels when he has just discovered that he has a liver. He supposed that now she would ask him how his inner life was getting on, and he dreaded having to admit that he didn't know. He didn't in fact know anything about it, except that he had felt uncomfortably conscious of it at intervals, ever since she first mentioned it. There were other reasons why he struggled against the invitation with vigour. Very likely the rabbit, when the ferret has once got it by the throat, feels that the emergency is tapping unsuspected depths of savagery in its character. But the ferret never knows that, and Sir Maurice never knew that Lord Kirkmabreck had fought against joining his party.

Lord Kirkmabreck found himself fingering the stem of a cocktail glass. His eyes roamed wildly round the room and came back feebly to find themselves engaged by the bright, ever-inquiring stare of Miss Anstey.

"Who are you looking for?" she asked.

"Oh, no one . . . no one."

"I don't think Lady Kirkmabreck is here."

He gazed at her with helpless and apprehensive dislike and said nothing.

"Look here, George," said Sir Maurice in an undertone to Bullace, "this party is going to be a failure. Can't we get someone else to join it?"

"I'll see." Bullace rose inconspicuously and left them. He returned after a few moments to an almost silent table and whispered that he had managed to get hold of the Telluses.

The Telluses were seen following behind him, apparently in argument.

"Very well, then," said Harry. "Only don't blame me if I get drunk and disgrace you."

"They'll all be drunk, I expect," said Huffy hopefully, "as it's a farewell party. Then nobody will notice you, will they? But, Harry, I'm going to be ever so nice to Sir Maurice. You won't spoil everything, will you?"

"I'll be as good as gold," Harry promised, "unless he tries to do something for me, as you call it. If he starts helping me in my career, I shall put the matter into the hands of my solicitors."

They joined the party and Sir Maurice placed Huffy next to himself. Miss Anstey took possession of Harry.

"I never hear introductions," she explained. "Now first tell me what your name is and then tell me the name of that pretty girl who came with you."

"M' name," said Harry in a deep voice, "is Tellus. So is that of the wench. Mrs. Tellus, if you don't mind my boasting."

"Your wife? Really? She looks so young, doesn't she? Don't you think that Sir Maurice seems to be impressed by her?"

"Not half so much as she's impressed by Sir Maurice. The girl is young, Miss Anstey, as you say. But, anyway, you knew that we were married, didn't you? We've met here before, even if you've forgotten my name."

"Have we?" Miss Anstey was slightly disconcerted. "Of course I know you both well by sight, but I'm such a fool about names."

Harry grinned at her.

Sir Maurice said to Huffy: "And when is your husband coming to see me?"

"To sell you a wireless set, do you mean, Sir Maurice?" she asked innocently.

"I should like to buy a wireless set from him. But he ought to be doing something better than that."

"There's so much gained at any rate," was the inner meaning of her little nod. What she said was: "He's very anxious to get on." She hoped that Harry was too much occupied with Miss Anstey to overhear her. She knew that he would not mind her making her eyes large and looking up with them into Sir Maurice's red, benevolent face.

It was Phyllis who, made restless by Barbara's continued silence and melancholy, as well as by her own thoughts, suggested that they should go upstairs and eat. Lord Kirkmabreck made a last effort to regain his freedom, but his incoherent murmurings were stilled by Sir Maurice's friendly, heavy hand on his shoulders. He allowed himself to be propelled towards the dining-room, throwing distraught glances behind him as he went.

The movement of the party was as a signal for others to go for the same purpose. It was the dead centre of the Bran Pie's evening, and the dancing-room was empty when Mona came in, a little in haste and looking as though she had an apology on her lips. There was, however, no one there to receive it.

Carlo, walking through with an anxious expression to make sure that all was well, invitingly drew out a chair for her at a comfortable table in a corner. Mona was always pleasant in manner to him and he appreciated it. It seemed to him that lately most of the members of the club had fallen into the way of bullying him. Besides, did not the Earl of Kirkmabreck come here (and he had been coming on two nights out of three) to see her and no one else? It was true that the Earl treated her with a shy deference which was absurd, considering his position and hers. But Carlo had noticed the fierce expression with which he regarded any man who spoke to her. A fierce expression on the

face of Lord Kirkmabreck was a noticeable thing, and Carlo had drawn his own conclusions from it.

Therefore he pulled out a chair for Mona and said wheedlingly: " Mademoiselle would like a cocktail? "

" Yes, please, Carlo," she said, gazing over his shoulder at the door. " I'm rather tired. Shall I have a Bronx? "

" No, miss," Carlo decided, kindly authoritative. " You leave it to me, miss. I will mix it myself."

He went away and she could hear him, just round the corner, being severe with the barman. " No, no, Ge-orge, just so much, see? This is *my* special cocktail."

She wondered where David was. It was true that they had not definitely arranged to meet to-night. She had humbled herself so far as to tell him that she would never expect him to make any binding engagement with her. She knew that he was not his own master, and she would not run the risk of tempting him to concoct inept excuses in order to be with her. But she did want to see him to-night, and he had said that he would be there. The reason was that the day before she had let him buy her a frock—not because she wanted a frock from him, but because she thought that the purchase would keep Mr. Rosenberg quiet for a little while.

She'd been brazen enough about it with her employer, who had found her wearing the frock in the fitting-room, while the pin-mumbling fitter on her knees was busy with the hem.

" Aren't I lucky? " she said. " Lord Kirkmabreck is giving it to me."

Mr. Rosenberg subdued the admiration in his eyes to a more respectful glow. Then he, too, knelt, examined the recalcitrant hem, and gave an expert opinion.

" Just take it off a minute, Miss Fenwick," he said.

" If you'll go out, Mr. Rosenberg," she replied politely. He became still more respectful and went.

But with her lover she was not so much at ease. It was not that she had had to coax the frock out of him.

He had tried to make her presents before. That made it all the worse that, having so often virtuously refused, she should now have yielded. She wanted to see David, so as to be sure that he did not hold her cheaper. She could hardly tell him that the yielding had been necessary to keep Mr. Rosenberg quiet.

But he wasn't there. She wondered again where he was. She imagined him as being taken out by his wife to a dinner-party of the sort where she could never hope to sit with him. At this moment, perhaps, he was eating his fish and jerking a well-meant "Yes" or "No" to his neighbour. She hoped he wouldn't upset something on his clothes and make Gladys angry with him. The whole scene, the long room, the mahogany table, the brilliant silver and glass, the well-dressed company, saying fashionable, illustrated-paper nothings, came vividly before her eyes, which began to prick a little. After all, he was *her* David, because she had given him something which no one else had given him. She felt, for a moment, like a mother whose little boy has gone to a party alone for the first time.

She was exaggerating this mood into real sentimentality when she saw Euan. He came in looking sulky and defensive, but he brightened at once.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"No, I'm surrounded by people," she answered with deliberate cheapness. She was not in a mood to care what Euan thought of her.

He seemed to be elated by finding her, almost as though he had been looking for her, and she was a little consoled by his pleasure. He sat down at her side and shouted for a waiter.

"Have you dined yet?"

"No. I don't know that I feel much like dining."

"Nor do I. I was asked out to a party, but I didn't feel like it. What's that you're drinking? Will you have the same?" He gave the orders and turned to her again. "Would it bore you to keep me company to-night?" he asked.

"Not if you'd like it."

The waiter brought the cocktails. Carlo had gone, and the barman had mixed Mona's special prescription out of his own head, but she did not know that. They drank the cocktails and grew gayer. Mona began to chatter about her day's work and to tell stories of Mr. Rosenberg.

"I say," Euan interjected, "he seems rather a brute to have as an employer."

"I know how to manage him," she asserted confidently. She went on to tell him how the Rosenbergs had gone to the Riviera, though Madame would sooner have gone to Monte Carlo.

Euan laughed immensely and lifted his glass to her. "You've made me feel better," he said. "I almost believe I could eat something now. Could you?"

"Yes, if you're going to."

Euan was detained for a moment at the head of the stairs by an acquaintance, and Mona entered the dining-room in advance of him. He hurried to catch her up, and found her in a queer temper.

"We'll sit here," she said, so abruptly that he sat down without looking round him. But his first enquiring glance for a waiter revealed the party at the long table in the corner. He saw Phyllis and her father, Barbara, Babs Anstey, and Bullace, the two Telluses, Kirkmabreck, and some others whom he did not recognize. Sir Maurice had managed to get a tableful together after all.

He was not averse from being seen by them. It was his intention to nod and smile at Phyllis in a friendly manner. But Mona burst into furious conversation, leaning across the table and placing her head so close to his that he could not see the other table.

Phyllis and her friends had indeed escaped from the melancholy which had enveloped them before dinner. Barbara still wore an air of gentle resignation but the others were boisterous. Sir Maurice was talking mock-seriously to Little Fanny about the wine, and she, having

no appreciation of either wine or humour, was looking sulky. Bullace was trying to teach Phyllis to make a musical noise with her finger on the rim of a glass. An unknown girl, whom no one there had ever seen before, had joined the party in a manner no one could account for, and seemed to be on intimate terms with every member of it. She was now throwing bread pellets across the table at Kirkmabreck, who was returning the fusillade with more enjoyment than accuracy. A waitress hovered round the table, wondering whether, since they had all stopped eating in the middle of a course, she ought to take the plates away.

To her Sir Maurice turned his attention. "What are you going to give us next?" he demanded.

"It's an ontree-coat, sir," she answered nervously.

"Impossible!" cried Sir Maurice. "Can't you do something more exciting for us than that?"

"I haven't been here very long, sir," she said in a frightened voice.

"Send Carlo to me," he bade her.

Mona's first burst of conversation had exhausted itself, and she and Euan began their meal together in an atmosphere of polite constraint.

"Salt?" she said to him, pushing it across the table.

"Thank you," he said. "Mustard?"

Whatever it was Sir Maurice had ordered instead of the ontree-coat seemed to take a long time to cook, and, while they were waiting, his guests grew ever more rowdy. Little Fanny brought up more bottles of wine, and Kirkmabreck began throwing pieces of crust instead of pellets. His aim, too, grew ever wilder, and twice he hit a middle-aged couple dining primly at the next table. On the second occasion Sir Maurice went over to them and suggested that they might be safer with his party.

"Lord Kirkmabreck," he said pleasantly, "seems to have a high angle of fire."

They declined, and looked at one another, mutely asking, for all the world to see, whether they had really

been wise in joining this club which, besides being so much cheaper than the Embassy, was also so very, very different.

Euan knew that he and Mona had not gone unobserved. He knew with what intelligent malice Babs Anstey regarded them, and that, though he had not caught her eye, Phyllis also was aware of their presence. Kirkmabreck alone was care-free and unconscious. He had a bottle or so of champagne inside him; he had forgotten why he had been unwilling to join this party, and he was playing a game of throwing bread as innocently as a dog runs after stones. From time to time he made yelping noises.

"Butter?" asked Euan, passing the dish to Mona.

"Thank you," she replied, passing the cheese.

They both ate angrily, neither at that moment much liking the other.

"That red hair means an unreasonable temper," Euan said to himself, trying to watch Phyllis so covertly that neither she nor Mona should see him doing so.

"He ought to take me out of myself," Mona thought, "instead of staring at that girl and wishing he were with her instead of with me."

Whatever it was Sir Maurice had ordered arrived and was served with ceremony, Carlo acting as hierophant. But no one took much interest in it, except Barbara Lackland, who went on eating without any change in her air of subdued sadness. Harry Tellus, at her elbow, having given up any idea of eating himself, watched her with wide-eyed interest. Huffy chattered ingenuously to Sir Maurice in the intervals of his preoccupation with his guests. Now and again she signalled to Harry not to stare so hard at Barbara's knife and fork, but she knew that she signalled in vain.

Save for Barbara, the dinner-party had almost given up the pretence of being a party that was eating dinner. It resembled more closely indeed the Mad Hatter's tea-party, except that the movements of its members

from seat to seat were so much less regular. Then Babs Anstey took a hand.

She leant across to Phyllis and said: " I'm going to make that young man come over here." Phyllis shrugged one shoulder slightly. Babs, however, went to Euan and said: " Phyllis wants to speak to you." To Mona she said: " Lord Kirkmabreck is sick to death of all of us. Do you think you could come and keep him amused? "

There were a few confused moments and then a sulky, embarrassed Euan was sitting next to Phyllis, and Mona was sitting opposite an inarticulate, distressful David.

" I thought this was where you must be," said Mona, with offensive moderation.

The Earl stared round him desperately, wondering how he could make some apology which would not be overheard by the others. He was saved by the unknown girl, who suddenly cried in an arresting voice: " I want to be wild to-night! "

" Be wild with me," said Bullace soothingly.

" Shall I? " She crossed to his side of the table and, by way of being wild, drank out of his glass. He made her share his seat, and she put her head on his shoulder.

Barbara looked up from her plate to say to Sir Maurice: " Who's that? "

" I don't know," he replied. " I thought it might be a friend of yours." She gave him a reproachful glance.

By this time it had become clear to the rest of the club that there was a party in progress. Bertie Farwig, sniffing the aroma from afar, pranced to join it. Ridgeway Rowland, finding himself alone in the Bar Parlour, heard people talking loudly and gravitated naturally towards a chance of talking himself.

He inserted himself ruthlessly between Sir Maurice and Huffy, and said to the former: " Have you read my article in the *Recorder* to-day? "

Sir Maurice, interrupted in the middle of telling Huffy

that she must be a great help to her husband, looked up and said that he hadn't.

"A pity," said Ridgeway Rowland, drawing up a chair. "It's a great pity that you City men can't ever be got to listen to sense. Now, what I said was this . . ."

"Come and dance," Euan said to Phyllis.

"When we go down," she replied coldly.

The unknown girl raised her head from Bullace's shoulder and murmured confidentially to Phyllis.

"I'm sorry . . ." said Phyllis, leaning a little nearer.

"I said—he's trying to undo my suspender," announced the unknown girl in a piercing whisper. "By the way, aren't there going to be any more drinks at this party?"

The next arrival was Mr. Damara, who pulled up a chair between Euan and Phyllis, and patted her knee in a paternal manner.

"Do you know, Miss Blabey," he said, "I should like to paint you." He tilted his chair a little way from the table, so that he could run his eye comfortably over her from neck to ankle. "You ought to be painted in costume. I've got a costume in my studio that would just suit you."

"You keep it in a match-box, I suppose," suggested Bertie Farwig, who was leaning over her from behind her chair. "Don't you listen to him, Miss Blabey. He's a dirty old man."

"Yes, Rowland, by all means—do send it to me," said Sir Maurice. "I'll read it with pleasure. . . . Phyllis, my love, I think we ought to go downstairs. Do you suppose that Barbara has finished?"

Euan stood up so suddenly that Mr. Damara, whose chair was balanced on two legs, was nearly overturned. Euan put out a hand to save the painter from disaster and passed behind him to Phyllis.

"The first dance is mine," he asserted.

"I'm sorry," said Phyllis, who was already being led away by Bullace.

" She's pinched him from me," whispered the unknown girl in Euan's ear. " We were getting on so well, too. Just wait a minute while I do up my suspender again."

She put a detaining hand on his elbow, and kept him while the rest of the party surged round them and down the stairs. He shook her off and started in pursuit. When he reached the dancing-room he found that Phyllis was already moving in Bullace's arms and Mona in Sir Maurice's. He went up the stairs again, morosely, in the direction of the Bar Parlour. Through the open door of the dining-room he saw the unknown girl sitting in a relaxed posture with Little Fanny standing in front of her.

" But I *can't* do it up, miss," Little Fanny was saying, " because it isn't undone."

" It must be undone," said the unknown girl. " I tell you he undid it."

" Well, it isn't undone now, miss, you can see for yourself." And Little Fanny assumed the pout which had become so much second nature with her that she used it even when speaking to other women.

" I don't need to see. Do you mean to tell me that I don't known when a gentleman is undoing my suspender at table? "

" Perhaps," Little Fanny brilliantly suggested, " he did it up again afterwards."

This idea struck the unknown girl very forcibly. " Perhaps he did," she said. " I must go down and thank him."

Euan stole cautiously away, and the swing-door of the Bar Parlour closed behind him, admitting him to emptiness and peace. There was no one there but Kirkmabreck, who stated that it would be his privilege to set up the drinks.

" You drink whisky, don't you, sir? " said fat Philip.

Euan owned that he did.

" Doubles, please," said the twelfth Earl of Kirkmabreck. He seemed to feel a gloomy satisfaction in

giving the order, and Euan felt the same in his acquiescence.

There was a silence between them, until Euan said: "The same again?"

"The same," agreed the twelfth Earl of Kirkmabreck, finishing what was left in his glass.

"The same, please," Euan quite unnecessarily instructed Philip, who was already pouring the same out. "Funny lot, aren't they?" he said to the peer.

"Funny!" uttered Kirkmabreck deeply. He drank. "There was a sort of journalist or something. He was telling me about a speech I ought to make in the House of Lords."

"Damned nerve!" Euan sympathized.

"Yes, but that isn't the real joke."

"No?" said Euan, sipping his whisky and telling himself that he must go carefully.

"No—not at all. The real joke is that I'm not in the House of Lords."

"Quite a good joke," said Euan. "I think we'd better go down again."

"Had we? Oh—er—yes . . ." Kirkmabreck took a hesitant step towards the door and paused. "'S matter of fact, I don't want to go down again just yet."

Euan intimated that in that case he would go alone, but Kirkmabreck held him with an uneasily appealing eye. "'S matter of fact," he said, "I'm in a bit of trouble." Then, growing suddenly eloquent, he told Euan why he was afraid to face Mona.

Euan found that the contemplation of someone else's troubles was comforting in his own: they seemed so easy of solution. "Go and explain to her," he advised. "She's bound to forgive you. She's pretty sensible, I should think." He remembered that red hair and was suddenly silent.

"She's wonderful!" cried Kirkmabreck. But immediately he looked lugubrious and ordered two more whiskys. "You see," he explained, "I should just

burble and look a fool, and she'd walk away and never speak to me again. So far she's never found out that I'm a fool." He dipped his nose into his glass, briefly, as a bird drinks, and seemed to get inspiration from it. "Do you think I'd better write to her?" he asked.

"What would you say?"

The Earl considered. "I should say 'Dear Mona'—or something like that, you know—'I'm sorry I cut our appointment but it wasn't my fault, because Sir Maurice wanted to talk to me about business. You know he is doing business with Gladys's family and, of course, I have to see about it. I am so sorry but it really wasn't my fault.' Then—er—well, I should just end up, you know."

"It looked like the hell of a business party, I must say," Euan criticized. "You were throwing bread about when we came up."

"I don't know," said Kirkmabreck doubtfully. "Some of these financial chaps have the most cheery meals together and sell one another no end of things. I've always thought I might be some good at that," he went on in a reflective tone, "if they'd only give me a chance."

He was turning again with an automatic motion to the bar, when Euan decided on escape at any price, and cried: "I tell you what! I'll go and explain it all to her and make her understand how upset you are."

"Would you—would you really do that?"

"I will. You'll see."

"You're sure? You won't—you won't forget or anything? I mean—you see—what I thought was—I mean, it seemed to me you liked her a bit yourself."

"Good heavens, no!" said Euan heartily. "I'll put it all right for you."

It was hard at first in the smoke-filled dancing-room to make out what had become of the party. He stood unwisely in the doorway, and was button-holed by Mr. Ridgeway Rowland.

"You scientific fellows," said the distinguished

journalist, " don't realize what's wrong with industry. I've been pointing it out for years. There's an article of mine——"

" Half a second," Euan said. He had just caught sight of Phyllis being conducted back to a table by Harry, who had danced with her valiantly though she overtopped him by an inch or so. Euan followed whither they led, and that was to the seats reserved for Sir Maurice's party.

" Where's Mona? " he asked abruptly, mindful of his errand. It seemed to him that Phyllis raised the thin line of her eyebrows ever so slightly, and he wondered whether perhaps he was not being a little tactless. His mind, he suddenly reflected, must be blurred. Otherwise, for example, he would not so ridiculously have offered to be Kirkmabreck's ambassador.

" She's just behind you," Harry told him.

He turned, and there was Mona, and there was the music just starting again. It was obviously in his part to ask her to dance. But, as he swept her decorously away, he wished that he could have had a word of explanation with Phyllis first.

" I've got a message for you," he said to Mona.

" Oh, Euan, and I thought you wanted to dance with me! " Her tone was half-mocking, half-inviting. Her eyes were lit up, and there was something in her movements which suggested that she was letting herself go. Out for trouble, Euan said to himself, and felt faintly disturbed.

But he went doggedly on. " It's from Kirkmabreck," he said.

" Really? Has he gone home? "

" He's upstairs." Euan paused to consider what he should say next, and decided to take a bantering, avuncular tone. " You don't look frightening to me," he bantered heavily, " but that poor chap is really afraid to come near you."

She, too, lifted her eyebrows, tawny eyebrows that went up higher than Phyllis's had done. But the eyes

beneath were full of innocent enquiry. It changed to pity as he steered her into another couple and muttered an awkward apology.

He reddened, and stuck to his task. "He wanted me to explain to you——" They bumped into another couple—Phyllis and George Bullace, he saw with rage. He was sure that this time it was not his fault, but he was beginning to lose his nerve. It did not help him when Horace Griffin slapped his shoulder from behind and expressed the genial hope that he was enjoying himself.

"He was very sorry about to-night——" It began at last to appear to Euan that, even if only for Kirkmabreck's sake, he would have done better if he had left the thing alone. Mona was getting very angry.

"I don't know," she said, saving him with a violent jerk from another collision, "what you're trying to explain or what Lord Kirkmabreck is sorry for. And if I did, I don't know what you've got to do with it."

He gaped at her, and felt a cold drop of sweat trickling beside his left ear. Then all at once she left his arms and hurried past him to the door. He followed helplessly, and heard her saying: "Why, David, where have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere."

She invited herself into the Earl's arms and they danced off together, he giving Euan a suspicious glance as they brushed past him. The peacemaker dodged bemusedly across the dance-floor to Sir Maurice's table, where he found the unknown girl anxiously plastering her lips.

"Darling," she said, looking up as he approached, "doesn't that actress-woman use a disgusting lip-stick? Do taste it, darling." She impetuously smeared at his mouth, and, since he recoiled, achieved no more that a line of crimson across his chin.

George Bullace chose this moment to return Phyllis to her seat. Sir Maurice, wiping his brow, followed with Babs Anstey, and Ridgeway Rowland led in Barbara Lackland, who looked interestingly tired and dispirited.

"It didn't take *me* long," said Rowland, "to see what was wrong with Hollywood. I was dining one night with Laemmle, just the two of us, you know, and I told him——"

"Phyllis, dear," Barbara sighed, "I don't want to break up the party, but——"

Phyllis did not look pleased, but she put a good, if not a smiling, face on it. She said firmly: "Daddy, Barbara has to be up very early in the morning, and she wants to go home."

"But you must all," said Barbara, with a burst of wan gaiety, "come and have a last drink at my flat."

"We will," Bertie Farwig agreed, with animation. "We must give the little girl a send-off."

"I wonder who'd do as much for me," observed the unknown girl, in glum confidence to Euan.

Sir Maurice began to organize the party for purposes of transport. "Have you got anything to drink in your flat?" he asked Barbara, aside.

"I don't think I have," she murmured helplessly.

"Carlo!" That little difficulty was privately arranged.

No one, it seemed to Euan, wanted him to come, but he clung firmly to the others. There was always a chance that he might be able to take Phyllis home. He had made up his mind that if there should be a chance to-night, it would be now or never for him.

They were going downstairs, when Bray halted Sir Maurice with a whisper.

"A minute," said Sir Maurice and went to the telephone. "Yes . . . who is it? . . . yes, Joseph. . . . In five minutes, then." He put up the receiver and, turning round, said: "I must leave you. My faithful Joseph wants me. He always thinks best at this time of night. Good-bye, Barbara, my dear. Are you going to kiss me? I think you should." She held up her cheek, with a pale smile. "Good-bye, and the best of luck to you. Phyllis and I are coming to see you in Hollywood next year, aren't we? Have the marble

swimming-pool ready for us." He kissed her again and hurried down the stairs, crying over his shoulder: "Look after Phyllis, won't you, George?"

"I can't think," said the unknown girl to Euan, "what they all see in that woman to make such a fuss about."

They went into the street and a cold autumnal breath met them there. Ridgeway Rowland cocked his opera-hat over one ear, pushed his hands into the pockets of his overcoat, and gave it as his opinion that there was rain about.

"Good-bye, summer," sang Bertie Farwig, "good-bye, good-bye."

"That finishes it," muttered Harry Tellus to his wife. "I've had enough of Bertie for one night." He said aloud: "Well, we go a different way. Good night all, and good luck, Miss Lackland."

"Aren't you coming?" asked Barbara, without concern.

"No," Harry replied firmly. "I must be getting old, because nowadays I like being in bed before two o'clock, at least twice a week. This is once of the twice. Come on, Huffy." He tucked his arm into hers and drew her away in the direction of the tube station.

"Where's Lord Kirkmabreck?" Barbara enquired. But he and Mona had already disappeared, without farewell.

The taxis for which Bray had telephoned appeared at the entrance. Euan stationed himself by Phyllis and was ready to help her in, when Ridgeway Rowland's hand fell heavily on his elbow.

"Look at that taxi!" cried the distinguished journalist indignantly. "In spite of all I've written about it, they still allow these wretched two-cylinder cabs on the streets."

Euan growled and plunged after Phyllis, who was being handed in by Bullace. Undeterred, he followed them, but he could not prevent the unknown girl from following him and joining him on the seat behind the

driver. He sat bolt upright as he felt her arm stealing through his.

"Tell me, darling," she said dreamily, "who are these people in our cab?"

When they arrived, they found that Bertie in the other cab had insisted on having the hood down, and was sitting on the roof, singing. Barbara looked sadder than ever, and said in a dying tone: "I hope no one will complain about the noise."

"Do be quiet," Phyllis whispered to Euan. "We don't want to get Barbara into trouble on her last night here."

"Be quiet!" said Euan fiercely to the unknown girl, "or I'll wring your neck."

"I'm sorry, darling," she replied submissively. "But," she continued in a loud and partly melodious squawk, "my sweetie's gone away—my swee-eetie's gone awa-ay!" Euan took her roughly by the arm and rushed her up the stairs to the door which Barbara had just opened.

The flat was stripped of all its eighteenth-century Italian trappings and looked barely habitable. The sitting-room contained two chairs and a naked electric-light bulb hanging from the ceiling. There was also a heap of travelling-rugs in a corner, and here, though Euan strove to put her in one of the chairs, the unknown girl preferred to collapse. Euan arranged her as decently as he could, and was just standing up again, when Phyllis and George arrived. They were followed by Ridgeway Rowland and Bertie Farwig, whom Babs Anstey had succeeded in subduing.

George produced a bottle of whisky from his pocket. Somehow, cups and a jug of water were provided. Euan found himself sipping an unwelcome drink and watching Phyllis as she stood, looking not at all tired, talking to Babs in a corner.

Bertie Farwig said: "I like whisky in tea-cups," and drained his. He added thoughtfully: "I like it in anything." He gazed round the room and cried: "I bet

no one here could kick that bulb out." He tried, slipped, and fell with a resounding crash on his back. George Bullace picked him up.

"I can't do it," said Bullace, "but I don't mind trying." He tried, and with gymnastic contortions recovered his balance.

Then the unknown girl rose from the floor and addressed the company. "I used," she said, "to be able to kick over my head, but I don't know whether I can now"

She kicked, and a long, well-shaped leg rose towards the ceiling, missed the bulb by an inch or so, and seemed to be arrested miraculously for ever in a perpendicular position.

"I'm not surprised," she said, with unexpected calm. "It gets stuck like that sometimes. It's a sort of cramp." She looked round the circle complacently, tottered on the remaining leg and slumped backwards. Euan caught her and eased her to the floor.

"Thank you, darling," she said. "I never really thought I should bring it off, you know."

Bullace lounged towards Euan and, with a flash of his white teeth, said in a carrying undertone: "Don't you think you'd better take her home?"

"She's nothing to do with me," Euan replied indignantly.

"Isn't she?" Bullace's eyebrows went up. "I thought you seemed to be looking after her." He stared at Euan consideringly for an appreciable number of moments, as though trying to appraise his state of mind.

Euan put on a sullen look under this inspection, and Bullace lounged back to Phyllis, to whom he said something inaudible.

"I can go home by myself," she answered sharply.

"No, no. Cartaret will take you, and then I can look after this girl."

Euan tried to look as though he were not listening for her reply, and succeeded in not hearing it. Meanwhile

he edged away from the unknown girl, eluding her affectionate clutch at his knee. She rolled over, buried her face in the bundle of rugs, and burst into tears.

Bullace bent over her and tried to drag her to her feet. "Come, come," he said sternly, "you mustn't go on like this here, you know."

She rose by her own effort. "I'm all right," she assured him, in a perfectly normal voice. "This is only what they call the maudlin stage. Are you going to take me home, darling? That lousy swine over there doesn't like me any more. By the way, you aren't the gentleman that undid my suspender, are you?"

"You'll look after Phyllis, Cartaret," said Bullace, with what struck Euan as an unnecessary air of authority. He added more quietly to Phyllis: "You'd better get off. This young person is going to be a bit of a handful."

"I don't want *any*body to come to the station to-morrow," said Barbara, at the door. "Not *any*body. I want to set off all alone."

"Except for the photographers," thought Euan. He said aloud: "Best of luck to you and all that. Come on, Phyllis."

The two girls kissed.

"Good-bye, Phyllis," said Barbara. "I shall often think of you when I am working."

"Good-bye. I shall go to see all your pictures."

As Euan drove Phyllis down the stairs, they heard the unknown girl asking, in a tone of pure philosophic enquiry but with appalling distinctness: "If he does a thing like that at the dinner-table, what will he do in a cab?"

IV

Euan supposed, when he put Phyllis into a taxi and told the driver to go to Regent's Park, that he had hit on an original device.

"I wonder," she yawned, "why men always say

Regent's Park to the driver when they mean to be silly. I don't want to go to Regent's Park, Euan. "I want to go home."

He flushed angrily at the thought of the philandering experience she implied. "But I want to talk to you," he said, with a touch of hardness in his voice.

"I can't talk—I'm too sleepy. Oh, do let me go home, Euan . . . oh, Euan, if you won't let me go home, do at least let me be comfortable."

He removed the arm he had attempted to put round her and stared gloomily at the driver's back while the taxi crossed the emptiness of Oxford Street.

Presently a small, weary voice said: "If you want to talk about anything, do it now. We really must be turning back soon. Daddy will be wondering where I am."

"You know what I want to talk about." Trees flashed by them, ghostly under the tall lights, beyond which stretched the black spaces of the park. He waited for her reply, but she did not, so he went on: "You know that I want you to make up your mind."

"What about?"

"Don't play the fool, Phyllis," he cried miserably. "You know very well what about." In his mind he kept saying: "Now or never, now or never," in tune with the beats of his heart. Again he put out his arms to take her to him, but she stiffened and drew away very slightly.

"Why can't you wait?" she asked, in the voice, half-petulant, half-reasonable, that he had dreaded. "We haven't even known one another very long."

He did not know how to explain to her why he could not wait. It was all muddled, and he, too, was sleepy, driven on only by that recurrent beat of "Now or never" in his mind. She was so elusive . . . she lived so much of her life in a world that was not his . . . there were so many people round her, most of whom he intensely disliked . . . Barbara was going, but Babs Anstey and Bullace remained. He knew only that he

must have her now or make up his mind to having her never: there was no third choice that he could endure.

All he said was, childishly: "You promised you would."

She sighed and answered: "Do you want to hold me to my promise?"

The heaviness in the pit of his stomach grew more oppressive and seemed to interfere with his breathing. "You've changed your mind?" he asked, with difficulty.

Before she could give the inevitable reply, the cab stopped and the driver came to the door. "I've been round the park once, sir," he said grumblingly. "D'you want me to go round any more?"

"Would it be any good?" was the meaning of Euan's glance at Phyllis, and she shook her head. He gave the cabman the address of Sir Maurice's flat and they drove on.

As though she knew that she had won her battle, and as though she half regretted it, Phyllis lost her sleepiness with her aloofness and began to be eager in explanation and excuse.

"Euan, dear," she said, taking his hand with a more spontaneous gesture of affection than he had ever known her use before, "do you think I've treated you very badly?"

"You couldn't help it, I suppose."

"You see . . . I don't want to be tied up too soon. I haven't gone anywhere or done anything, I don't know anyone. I should be restless and then you wouldn't be happy, would you? Babs says——" She paused.

"What does Babs say?"

"I told her all about it. You don't mind, do you? There was no one else I could talk to. She says it would be worse for you if we got married and then I was restless, than if you waited till I was ready."

"I see."

His tone was such that she said no more until the cab

stopped. Then, as, with silent politeness, he accompanied her into the doorway, she asked, almost timidly: "Shall I write to you?"

"That depends," he answered in a hard, steady voice, "on what you say when you do."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away. "Never," said Euan to himself as he got back into the cab. Yet he turned to have a last glimpse through the little window at the back, to see whether by any chance she had lingered in the doorway to see him go. It was one of those maddening cabs which have no little window in the back. They swung round the corner towards Highgate, while he was still gaping at the blank cloth of the hood.

Phyllis was determined to be all cheerfulness when she entered the flat. "Are there any sandwiches?" she cried. "And I want a drink."

Mr. Pratz assumed an expression of guilt. "I've eaten them all," he confessed. "Every one. And what's worse, I've kept your father up till nearly two o'clock."

"Phyllis, my love," said Sir Maurice, "will you get what you want and take it away with you? We're very busy, I'm afraid."

She looked at him in some surprise. His tone was almost rough. And when she looked she was still more surprised by his appearance. She was used to seeing him drink too much on occasion. It made him redder in the face, it made him perspire, it made him very genial. She did not really mind it. But this was different. He was perspiring but he was pale, and his face, instead of expanding as it usually seemed to do, had grown narrow. His lips were blue and loose and his hands were trembling. He turned away and began to pour himself another drink, and she was afraid that he was going to drop either the bottle or the glass.

"You'll never forgive me," said Mr. Pratz, who looked as he always did, a neat man with a hard porcelain finish. "First of all I eat your sandwiches and

then I keep your father up half the night. But we can't help it, you know."

"Go to bed, my dear," jerked Sir Maurice, without turning round.

"I do apologize," said Mr. Pratz. He had risen when she entered and now he sat down again, contriving thus to indicate that he really did appeal to her to obey her father. She took one look round the room, at the ash-trays filled with cigar-butts and cigarette-stubs, at the ash on the carpet and the empty siphons, said good night in a subdued voice, and went to bed.

She went mechanically through her preparations for the night, wiped the light make-up from her cheeks and lips, put on the grease, brushed her hair, shed the dressing-gown with one movement from her shoulders. She stood for a moment before the mirror, naked for refreshment, looking at her reflection but not seeing it, wondering why Euan had been so urgent, glad she had had the strength to resist him, speculating vaguely as to whether she would ever see him again, and, if so, what she would feel then. With the first shiver she pulled on her thin nightdress and got between the sheets. She was too tired to think, she would not think, about anything, about Euan, about Babs's advice, about Barbara's departure, she would not think about her father's strangeness, until the morning. But until the morning all these cares tossed up and down in her dreams like driftwood on an uneasy sea.

In the sitting-room, Mr. Pratz smiled his cool, hard, porcelain smile at Sir Maurice, a smile in which, for all its coolness and hardness, there were traces of affection.

"Well, my boy," he said, "there it is and that's all there is to be said about it."

"I don't like it any better than I did," Sir Maurice muttered, putting his hand out automatically to the decanter. As he removed the stopper, he looked sharply at Mr. Pratz and said: "I suppose you think I'm drinking too much?"

"You are," said Mr. Pratz, "but the occasion excuses

it. You don't like what I suggest. I don't wonder. I don't like it myself. But what else are we to do?"

"Better give up the whole thing—get out as best we can."

"We shan't get out very well. You know that. If this falls through, General Finance goes and most of its companies. We shall have no credit left; we shan't be able to start again, you know."

"At any rate, we shall have done no one any harm."

"Shan't we?" Mr. Pratz's smile became gently satirical. "The small investor will get it, as they say, in the neck. He'll lose money, the poor devil!"

"Well, then, we shan't have done anything wrong."

"Except making the small investor lose money. He'll shout for us to be put in the dock. Of course we shan't go there—but I'm not sure that he won't be morally right. Be honest with yourself, Maurice. What you mean is that we shan't have done anything criminal."

"Criminal, if you like. Damn it, Joseph, don't split hairs to-night—I can't stand it." Sir Maurice emptied his glass, picked up the decanter, put it down again, and wiped his forehead. "Better not have any more," he muttered. "Not thinking very clearly as it is. Look here, I tell you what, we'll have one more go at making old Glossop see reason before we decide to do anything else."

"No use at all, Maurice." Mr. Pratz's tone was as decisive as the movement of his head. "If we don't take up Glossop's offer within a few days or if we go on arguing with him, he'll smell a rat. And if he once smells it, he'll put a leash on it and lead it down Throgmorton Street for everyone to see. He don't like us, you know. He'd as soon see us smashed as get his money."

"He's one of these blasted practical men," Sir Maurice burst out. "Started as an electrical engineer and resents our having anything to do with the business."

"Are you going to let him beat us? It's now or never."

Sir Maurice took another drink but did not taste it. " Very well," he said, sitting down heavily.

" Come in some time to-morrow afternoon," said Mr. Pratz, " and I'll tell you what arrangements I've made."

Ten minutes later Phyllis stirred and half woke as she heard the door shutting behind her father's partner. An hour later she half woke again as she heard her father stumbling to bed.

CHAPTER X

GATHERING CLOUDS

I

THE long windows that gave on the courtyard of the hotel were wide open and the light curtains flapped as the morning breeze began to blow.

Clarice Bullinger-Hope was awakened by the flapping, but she spoke as though she had been awake, and as though she and her husband had been talking, all the night long.

"I'm very sorry, Jack," she said, "but how was I to know you wouldn't like her?"

Jack Bullinger-Hope, lying relaxed in the bed separated from hers by the night-table, turned over and grunted: "What's that?" Then he whipped away the clothes and swung his feet to the floor. "What did you say, Clarry?" he asked.

The first reply was a muffled sob. After that, Clarice sat up and said: "Why did you let me go to sleep without kissing me good night?"

"Damn it all, my good girl," said her husband, "I tried to kiss you, but you hit me in the eye."

"I didn't," protested Clarice, but without conviction. "I only pushed you away."

"Then I hope you'll never try to hit me. If I hadn't known how to duck, I should be a pretty sight now."

"I didn't hurt you, darling, did I?" Clarice sighed. "I'm so glad I didn't."

"That's all very well, my dear," said Jack Bullinger-Hope, "but this sort of thing can't go on."

Clarice pushed her face into the large white pillow and began to sob again. " I've told you—I'm sorry," she announced in spasms, " and now you're being unkind to me."

The celebrated polo-player got up from his bed, walked to the washstand and felt mechanically for his toothbrush. When he found it, he realized that it might seem unfeeling to clean his teeth at the moment, so he threw it down again, and it clattered into the basin. " Clarry," he said, " I really don't know what all this is about."

" I don't either, Jack. Come and make it up, there's a darling."

He went to her bed and sank his mouth into her neck just beneath the left ear. After a few moments she pulled herself away from him and said: " I really didn't know you wouldn't like her. You're so funny about people, Jack. Of course, she's a bit common and all that, but I didn't think it would matter in a hotel. Now we'll have to go on at once."

" What do you mean—go on at once? " he demanded, releasing her.

" Well . . . we can't stay here if I'm not to speak to Mrs. Rosenberg. I've promised to meet her at the Azaleas for a cocktail to-day."

" Oh, God! " groaned Jack Bullinger-Hope. " I never said you weren't to speak to her. I wouldn't say such a thing, Clarice. Oh, God! surely you can talk to her without letting me in? "

" I'm so sorry, Jack," said Clarice in a stifled voice. " It seems I can't help letting you down. You ought never to have married me."

" Oh, Christ ! " the husband exclaimed, on a note which was a good octave lower than before. " Can't you possibly understand the difference between letting me in and letting me down? Listen, Clarice. . . ."

Outside, in the courtyard of the hotel, two enterprising persons began, with harp and female voice, to render *La donna è mobile*. It was perhaps a good thing

that Jack Bullinger-Hope did not know the meaning of the words. He went to the window, swept the curtains aside and flung out a handful of unimportant coins from the dressing-table. The harpist and the singer scrabbled about in the dust for them, and then, partly out of gratitude and partly because they liked doing it, began *La donna è mobile* all over again from the beginning. He turned to continue the argument with his wife and found that she was already out of bed.

"I shan't be long," she said, bolting into the bathroom.

He pulled back the remaining curtains and let in the Mediterranean sunshine. The musicians made him fantastic bows and gestures of thankfulness. He scowled in return. They bowed and gesticulated again, mounted the harp on a small cart drawn by a smaller donkey and departed, kissing their hands to him several times. He strolled uncertainly towards the door of the bathroom, where he could hear a sound of splashing. He tried the door very quietly but found that it was locked. He went back to the basin and brushed his teeth, taking comfort in the astringent, hygienic taste of the toothpaste. He loafed after that for a moment or two, then rattled at the bathroom door. It was opened at once, and there was Clarice all wiped and polished, with a profusion of towels round her feet. She shrank for only a second as he approached her.

An hour later, in the deserted restaurant, he called for eggs on the plate and a couple of slices of bacon, and laughed to see Clarice sipping her orange-juice.

"It's good for the figure," she said defensively.

"If you get any thinner," he said, "I shall go on sleeping while you have your bath."

She blushed and lowered her head, both actions highly approved by her husband. She looked up again to say: "Good morning, Mrs. Rosenberg. We're going to meet at the Azaleas at twelve, aren't we?"

Mrs. Rosenberg passed on with gracious nod and smile. Bullinger-Hope concentrated his attention on his plate.

" She's really a nice woman," said Clarice. " We had a long talk last night while you were playing with that silly penny-in-the-slot roulette machine."

" Who is she? "

" I don't know, Jack. But she's an awfully good judge of clothes. And isn't it funny, Jack? She offered to introduce me to a place where I could get fifteen per cent off."

" I don't suppose," said Jack, scraping his plate, " that you know what fifteen per cent means."

" Yes, I do," Clarice replied triumphantly. " It means half-a-crown in the pound. Mrs. Rosenberg told me. But that isn't the funny point."

" It sounds funny enough to me," Jack muttered. " If you go to a place where they reckon half-a-crown in the pound as fifteen per cent, the only thing you'll get off is the skin taken off you alive."

" No," Clarice persisted, " that isn't the funny point. She was going to give me an introduction to Elspeth's. Don't you remember where that blue and beige frock came from, Jack? "

" The one you wore that day at Ranelagh? "

She nodded. " On our day at Ranelagh," she said softly, again lowering her head and blushing. He was overcome at once by a wave of reminiscent sentiment and by a wave of pride at having guessed right. He expressed his jubilation by beckoning to a waiter and ordering more eggs and bacon.

" What am I to do about Mrs. Rosenberg? " she asked presently.

" I suppose you must keep your appointment," he replied with deliberation. " Anyway, I want to look round and see if I can hire a decent car here. If I can, we'll run up to Ste. Ursule for lunch. It's only forty miles. You can have your cocktail with this Mrs. Rosenberg and we'll still be there before half-past one."

" You're going off round garages, then? " she asked, and it was his turn to nod. " All right, Jack, give me

some money to spend. As a matter of fact, I did see a lovely hat yesterday."

Jack Bullinger-Hope scraped his plate again and said: "You can have all the hats you want, Clarry. Will five *mille* be enough? Good. Then go to it, and I wish you luck. I'll pick you up at the Azaleas soon after twelve."

He rose at last, and they went out into the lounge together. Mrs. Rosenberg was sitting in a wicker arm-chair by the door with an air of patient permanence. She stirred when Clarice and her husband approached.

"You know," she said, "I should have hated this place if it hadn't been for you and your good lady. Nobody speaks to you, nobody takes the least notice of you. All round you there's people asking if they're browner than they were the day before yesterday, and that's all the life there is. Except," she added bitterly, watching them trying to get into the illustrated papers. But I'm no good at that. You've got to have good legs for a start, and—well—you can look at my legs if you want to. But Mrs. here——" She looked enquiringly at Clarice and her sullen husband.

"Mrs. Bullinger-Hope," said Clarice self-consciously, after letting the silence go on just a little too long.

Mrs. Rosenberg looked impressed, almost frightened. Jack saw a question coming to her lips and moved abruptly.

"Must go," he exclaimed. "Don't know where I shall find a car. Pick you up later, Clarice."

His going was hardly noticed by Mrs. Rosenberg, who was already asking: "Not *the* Bullinger-Hopes?"

"I suppose so," Clarice responded with a complacent negligence rendered possible by the fact that her husband was out of earshot.

"Have you," said Mrs. Rosenberg in a hushed voice, "—have you seen the picture of you in the *Rambler*?" Without waiting for an answer, she darted to a neighbouring table and came back with the paper. "There it is," she said.

And there it was. "The young and beautiful Mrs.

Bullinger-Hope," announced the caption, " the wife of the celebrated polo-player, who is spending part of her honeymoon with Mrs. Wilbur Creech's party at the famous Cap Martin villa. Mrs. Bullinger-Hope evidently believes in sunburn." And there was the young and beautiful Mrs. Bullinger-Hope, in a skimpy shirt and a scanty pair of shorts, gracefully, almost too gracefully, posed against the trunk of a palm-tree. She well remembered Bertie Harris persuading her to allow him to take the snapshot. How should she not? It was that which had made her husband take her away from Cap Martin to this less fashionable spot. But she had not known that the amateur photographer would have the indecency to send her picture to a London paper. She had not guessed that a London paper would think her important enough, or delectable enough, to be thus displayed. She was thrilled and ashamed and also frightened. She thanked Heaven that Jack had gone away to his garages.

To Mrs. Rosenberg she said: " I wish people wouldn't do things like that," as though it were a thing that was always happening to her. She suddenly remembered a day in Elspeth's shop when Lady Kirkmabreck—Gladys, since there was no longer any reason to think humbly about Lady Kirkmabreck—had objected to the shortness of a frock Jack wanted to buy for her. She wondered, with a slight shiver, what Gladys would think of the kit in the photograph when she saw it, as she certainly would. She would probably say something to Jack about it—might even write to him. That would be just like Gladys. Jack had liked those shorts when she had tried them on in the conjugal bedroom: he had been less appreciative when she had worn them on Mrs. Wilbur Creech's private beach at Cap Martin.

She closed the *Rambler* with a slight yawn. " Let's go to the Azaleas," she said, " and have that cocktail." Mrs. Rosenberg started to her feet with immediate respect, and they went out of the lounge. The concierge intercepted them, saying that there were letters.

" We'll take them with us," said Clarice. " Yes, I'll take Captain Bullinger-Hope's too." Mrs. Rosenberg rather wanted to stop and open hers then and there, but Clarice would not have it. They walked on into the sunshine and down to the promenade, where a fresh breath from the sea mixed with the dazzling light.

Clarice's coveted hat resided in a shop on the promenade, and thither she led her new friend. Mrs. Rosenberg cast an experienced eye over the window-display, over the fittings within, and over the assistant who remembered perfectly the hat in which Madame had been interested. But she said nothing until the assistant remarked that the price of the hat was fifteen hundred francs and Clarice unconcernedly opened her bag.

Then she burst out: " But, Mrs. Bullinger-Hope, fifteen hundred francs is nearly twelve pounds! Why, at home——"

" Don't you think it suits me? " asked Clarice. She was already wearing it, and it inspired her to an air of insolent ease. She felt that at this moment she would be able to face Jack even if he should have seen that picture in the *Rambler*. She took out two notes and dangled them. " Doesn't it? " she asked again.

Mrs. Rosenberg experienced a painful emotion. She wanted to tell Mrs. Bullinger-Hope that she could get much better value for the money at Elspeth et Cie in Brook Street, not to speak of Thierette in Wardour Street or Aglavaine in Shaftesbury Avenue. She did not, on the other hand, want to tell this fashionable and illustrated young woman that she was in the rag-business. The assistant looked at her closely, and obviously, Mrs. Rosenberg thought, penetrated her secret. " Just open your mouth," said the assistant to Mrs. Rosenberg's imagination, " and I'll meet you as an equal. And then look out for yourself."

" It's a beautiful hat," said Mrs. Rosenberg to Clarice. " So—so chic, isn't it? "

Clarice handed over the notes and put the change

back into her bag without counting it. " Come on," she said, " or we shall find my husband waiting for us and getting impatient."

They found a sheltered table in the garden of the Azaleas, and Clarice ordered champagne cocktails from the distinguished-looking waiter, who was rumoured to be, like all waiters on the Riviera, a Russian count. " Which is wicked," she said, " because we've only just had breakfast." Mrs. Rosenberg desired potato crisps, and the Russian count brought her a large dish of them. Some minutes later Clarice wanted salted pea-nuts, and again the nobleman was obliging. They sipped their cocktails and drowsed under the perfect sky.

Clarice was awakened from her dream by the appearance of a man. He was one of those dark, heavy men, and he looked over their table as though he had some proprietary right in it. He wore white flannel trousers, brown and white shoes, and a blue serge jacket which fitted closely over his emphatic stern. He also wore a yachting cap.

Clarice frowned at him in a puzzled way. Mrs. Rosenberg woke up too and said brightly: " Why, there you are, Albert! How do you feel now you're up? " To Clarice she explained: " This is Mr. Rosenberg. He was over at Monte Carlo last night with some gentlemen he met: that's why you haven't seen him before. Albert, this is my friend, Mrs. Bullinger-Hope."

It was obvious that Mr. Rosenberg did not catch the name. It was obvious indeed that he was not in a very receptive mood, since he did not notice even that his wife's friend, whatever her name might be, was a very attractive girl. He dragged a chair to their table, sat down and grunted: " The concierge said you'd taken the letters."

" The letters? Oh, yes, Albert." Mrs. Rosenberg fluttered a little and produced a packet, which he took and sorted.

" Only one for you. That's your private report on Elspeth, I suppose." Oblivious to her agonized glance,

he threw a thick envelope across the table to her. "Nothing but worry for me in these, I know."

Clarice sipped her cocktail, and tried to withdraw herself from this domestic scene. She turned over the letters in her hand. Nothing for her, except one from her mother. Mrs. Durdingham liked Exmouth very much. The hotel was exceedingly comfortable. General Barnes was most attentive and that made things very pleasant for her and she did not mind being chaffed about him at all. She sent her love to dear Jack, and he was to be told that it was wonderful not to have lost a daughter but to have acquired a son who was so generous and understanding. Clarice tore the letter into small pieces which she deposited in the saucer lately occupied by the potato-crisps.

Mr. Rosenberg was more deeply moved by his correspondence. "Kind God!" he growled, "they're down at Elspeth's again. I'd better close that place. No, don't wave your hands at me, Bathsheba, it was a mistake from the beginning, I tell you. Look at your private report. There may be something in that."

He bent his yellow-whited eyes again on a sheet of type-written figures, raising them only when he shouted "Waiter!" to the Russian nobleman who was adjusting potato-crisps and pea-nuts with professional nicety in a remote corner of the garden.

"Is there no explanation? No excuse?" he burst out suddenly. "Why doesn't that shop go? Look in your letter, Bathsheba. We ought not to be here. I told you two holidays in one year was too much."

"Albert! Albert!" said Mrs. Rosenberg in tones full of warning.

"Albert! Albert!" he echoed bitterly, "I suppose it makes no difference to you if poor Albert! Albert! is on the edge of ruin?"

"Albert," she said, inspired by recollections of a thousand plays and films, "you seem to forget that we have a guest."

"I can't pay attention to no guests," muttered Mr.

Rosenberg, " when I'm reading my bad news from home."

" I'm sure Mrs. Bullinger-Hope——" she laid great stress on the name, pronouncing it very slowly and distinctly — " I'm sure Mrs. Bullinger-Hope won't be interested in your bad news."

" Mrs. Bullinger-Hope! " He stared at Clarice who, embarrassed though she was, wanted to giggle. He rose and bowed and she felt inclined to rise and drop him a curtsey. But she also wanted to get away from the pair of them before her husband could arrive. Jack had not approved of Mrs. Rosenberg: what he would think of Mr. Rosenberg she did not dare to imagine.

But that was not at all in Mr. Rosenberg's programme. He immediately shouted again for the waiter and ordered more champagne cocktails. Clarice, after a feeble protest, sat nervously on the edge of her chair, watching the entrance to the garden.

" Why, what a chance! " cried Mr. Rosenberg, noisily crunching a mouthful of pea-nuts. " Fancy meeting one of our best customers here! "

Mrs. Rosenberg groaned, a slight but distinct groan, and Clarice looked perplexed. Mr. Rosenberg heard the groan and disregarded it: a good customer was a good customer, wasn't she, whether you met her on the Riviera or in the shop? " Why," he went on expansively, " I shouldn't wonder if that's one of our little frocks you have on now, Mrs. Bullinger-Hope. Yes, I remember it." He leant over and felt the hem of Clarice's skirt between finger and thumb. " Fine piece of stuff, that is. Now, we can find you some more like that, Mrs. Bullinger-Hope, if you'll honour us again."

" Elspeth, wasn't it? " asked Clarice in a faint voice.

" Yes. Of course, that isn't our only shop, you know, Mrs. Bullinger-Hope. I'd like you to see some of the others. If you can't find it at one, you'll find it at another—that's our motto, isn't it, Bathsheba? "

" Yes," Mrs. Rosenberg replied, briefly and inimically.

"Now, I'm not pleased with Elspeth's at all. In fact I'm thinking of closing it down altogether. Would you believe it, Mrs. Bullinger-Hope, the turnover's fallen by eighty pounds a week in six months? Is that management or is it not? Just look in your letter, Bathsheba, and see what Walton says about last week's figures. You see," he explained to the transfixed Clarice, "we're so worried about Elspeth's, we get a private report every week, while we're away, from the first sales."

"Presently, dear," said Mrs. Rosenberg, swallowing some obstinate impediment to speech.

"No, now. I want Mrs. Bullinger-Hope to know what we have to put up with in our business. Then she won't try to beat our prices down. Ha! ha!"

Submitting to authority, Mrs. Rosenberg opened the thick envelope and took out of it several sheets of pink note-paper, each containing a dozen words in a large, bold hand. At that moment, for Clarice, the blow fell. Her husband appeared in the entrance to the garden and caught sight of her at once. She had meant to rush to meet him and to drag him away, regardless of politeness, before he could get near the Rosenbergs. But he was full of high spirits and affection and reached her side much too quickly to permit of that. She looked up at him and knew that, good though his mood might be, Mr. Rosenberg would be too much for it.

Unfortunately the waiter had followed on his heels closely enough to give Mr. Rosenberg time for another order before acknowledging Clarice's dry-throated and almost inaudible: "May I introduce my husband? This is Mr.—Mr. Rosenberg."

"Sit down, Captain," said Mr. Rosenberg, who was always punctilious about the proper forms of address. "There's a cocktail coming."

Jack's face blackened and Clarice trembled. But as the waiter returned with the cocktails, there was a blessed interval without an outburst, and, before it was over, Mrs. Rosenberg provided a more than sufficient diversion.

She had been too much absorbed in her letter even

to notice Jack's arrival. Now she sat up, her eyes flashing and her opulent chest heaving. "That girl!" she cried in the richest accents of indignation.

"What is it, Bathsheba?" asked her husband irritably.

"She's getting us talked about. I always knew it! We shall have to get rid of her."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Mr. Rosenberg, frowning, as anxious now to silence her as she had been to silence him.

"That Fenwick! I always knew she would bring trouble on us. Don't say I didn't, Albert, because I told you. There have been men in bowler hats at the shop asking questions about her!"

Jack Bullinger-Hope uttered a great shout of laughter and picked up the cocktail in front of him, a sign that he was amused enough to be tolerant. "Men in bowler hats!" he cried with delight. "Go on, Mrs. Rosenberg, tell us what the naughty little girl has been doing." Clarice offered up a silent address of thanksgiving.

Mrs. Rosenberg, though she seemed still not to know that Captain Bullinger-Hope was there, was only too willing to satisfy his demand. She went on, informing the universe at large: "They've been coming and asking about her relations with Lord Kirkmabreck. Relations! That's a nice word to use about anyone in one of our shops!"

The effect of this on Captain Bullinger-Hope was stupendous. "Kirkie!" he roared, so loud as to make the Russian count drop a glass ten yards away. He continued in a hushed voice: "By God, Clarry, would you ever have believed it? Go *on*, Mrs. Rosenberg. Let's have the worst, and make it as bad as you can. Kirkie!" His last ejaculation could hardly be heard: it was no more than a movement of the lips with the air stirring between them. He sat down and planted both elbows on the table, wearing the expression of a man suddenly converted *to* the view that the world is a beautiful place after all. "Kirkie!" he murmured dreamily. "Having relations . . ."

"That's all there is, Captain Bullinger-Hope," said Mrs. Rosenberg, suddenly recalled to discretion by her husband, who was making semaphore signals with one hand on each jutting hip.

"But who is the girl?" asked Captain Bullinger-Hope. "What shop? Don't get rid of her before we go home. I want to go round and have a look at her."

An obscure sentiment of pity entered Clarice's heart. "You've seen her, Jack," she said gently. "Don't you remember that nice red-haired girl, who was kind to me once about some stockings? Don't you remember?"

"Of course I do," Jack replied. "Why, that was where——" She stopped him with a little nod. She did not want to discuss the blue and beige frock with the people from whom, in circumstances so odd, her mother had bought it for her. But Jack went on interestedly: "So that's your shop, is it? Yes, I've seen the girl, a damned good-looking girl, too. Why, I bought her half a dozen pairs of silk stockings myself. You're not going to set men in bowler hats on me, are you, Clarice?"

"Come on, Jack," said Clarice, "if you want to get to Ste. Ursule for lunch. Have you found a car?"

"Wait a minute. We must have the odd half." He ordered more drinks. "And I must know more about Kirkie and his little bit."

"It must be very painful for you, Captain," said Mr. Rosenberg. "Mrs. Rosenberg——" he gave her a vindictive glance—"didn't remember that you were connected with Lord Kirkmabreck by marriage."

"Not a bit of it," Jack assured him. "Painful! It's the best thing I've heard for months. Poor old Kirkie! The first time he tries to get away from that lemon of a wife, she sets the 'tecs on him and catches him. Well, all right, Clarry, if you're in such a hurry."

"I don't want you to drive too fast," she said, with pretty appeal. In her relief that Jack had not made a scene she was positively gracious to the Rosenbergs, and he, still chuckling, actually expressed a desire to see

them again. His wife was determined that he should not, but she did not say so.

The Rosenbergs remained where they were, agreeably fluttered but still a little inclined to reproach one another.

" Why should you drag in the shop like that, Albert," she asked, " whenever I make a friend? "

" Because the only friend I know is a good customer," he replied. " But why should you go telling him scandal about his relation? "

" He liked that," she said defensively. " He wanted to meet us again."

But the Rosenbergs were not to meet the Bullinger-Hopes again. On the mountainous road to Ste. Ursule, Clarice said nothing. She merely sat as tight as she could and hoped that her husband would not notice how pale she was or that with one hand she was clinging to the seat. He spoke only once. That was when, swinging round a hairpin-bend, he had adroitly avoided a motor bus descending on the wrong side by a clever use of his brakes and skidding the back wheels. As he changed the gears to shoot on again, he cried: " Good old Kirkie! " with a huge bellow of laughter.

But when they were at luncheon on the terrace of the restaurant, overlooking the serene bay a thousand feet below, she remembered that she had his letters and gave them to him.

" 'Scuse me, darling," he said. " I'd better look through them." To the first he muttered: " You'd think chaps would know by now that I don't lend money." To the second: " If that old fool Ashby can't carry out my instructions, I can easily find another broker." To the third: " Hullo, what the devil does Uncle Arthur want? " He looked more serious and studied the small, precise script affected by Lord Bullinger, while an excellent omelette grew cold on his plate.

He was silent so long and frowned so often over it that at last Clarice said, timidly, and knowing that she shouldn't: " Is there anything wrong, darling? "

" Nothing that need concern you." He went on

frowning, and tapping with his fingers on the tablecloth. Clarice, who had a healthy young appetite, signalled mutely to the waiter to bring the next course, at least to her.

The noise of the service woke her husband from his absorption. "How soon can we be packed?" he asked abruptly. "Could we catch the four o'clock for Paris?"

Clarice, not as a rule very definite, was quite sure that they could not.

"Anyway," he decided, "it wouldn't do. We'll take the night plane from Marseilles. I'll keep the car and drop it at the aerodrome. We'll have to be nippy."

"Is—is it something serious?" she hazarded.

"I warned Uncle Arthur to be careful," he growled. "Now he's asking for what he calls my moral support. That damned fellow, Blabey, is letting us down. And Uncle Arthur has let the whole family down. I'm not sure I haven't got grounds for an action against Uncle Arthur," he added angrily—all the more angrily because he was quite sure that he had none.

"Do you mean," asked Clarice, for whom the flavour of some really delicious cutlets was being spoilt by apprehension, "that Sir Maurice Blabey has run away with our money?"

"I don't put my money," said Captain Bullinger-Hope, "where anyone can run away with it. But I'm going to lose some money, so far as I can see, because Uncle Arthur trusts any smooth-spoken crook that gets hold of him. But I can't explain it to you. You'd never understand it, and there's no reason why you should. The main point is that we ought to be getting out of this. You don't want any more to eat, do you? You wouldn't if you'd had the news that I've had."

The last the Rosenbergs saw of their new friends, the Bullinger-Hopes, was later that afternoon, when a large and fast-travelling car nearly killed Mr. Rosenberg while he was vainly arguing with one of those extortionate Riviera cabmen.

II

"You'll want some new shirts, Euan," said Lucy, "and I don't think you've got enough thick socks to see you through the winter."

"Don't bother about things of that sort, old girl," he answered awkwardly. "I can look after all that."

She moved her shoulders impatiently and went on laying his clothes in the big trunk. She did not speak again for some time, and then she said: "Really, it's just as I told you, there's no hope of getting everything into these boxes."

Euan was sitting on his bed sorting papers. He had just reached a little bundle of short notes from Enid Stonier, which he neither wanted to keep nor could bring himself to destroy. He looked up and said vaguely: "I can come back for what's left over. I'm not going to the Equator, after all."

"You're just as likely to come back for anything," Lucy asserted. "I don't want all your stuff about the house when I'm doing my own packing."

"I'll come back and fetch it as soon as I'm properly settled in—I promise you."

"Settled?" Lucy crouched intently over the trunk and the curve of her back was eloquent. She tried not to look at the wall-paper in front of her. It was blotched and bulging, and when she could not help seeing it she thought: "I should have had Euan's room done this spring instead of mine. It's my fault. No wonder he wants to get out of the house."

Euan pondered for some time over her ironical ejaculation, and then said: "What are you getting at, Lucy? Are you really sick with me? I didn't make a single move to go until you——"

"Oh, yes, I know all about that. You waited till you had an excuse. You've got your excuse, and now you'd better go."

He went back to his papers. Here was the letter in which Enid had dismissed him, saying that it would be fun to see him again some day. A well-turned letter, that, and one which he might fairly reckon as a milestone in his life. He would keep it. Another, saying that she would meet him at Victoria, under the clock, and she hoped his little pub would be decently clean. Typical—he ought to keep it for remembrance.

"Euan!"

He brought his mind back with difficulty from Enid's letters.

"Do you really like Herbert?"

"I think he's a very nice chap. I admire——"

"I suppose you're ready to admire anyone who's ready to marry me. So is Auntie Mabel. If you don't look out she'll admire Herbert more than she admires you."

"I shouldn't mind that."

"And Father," Lucy continued, "thinks he's a miracle—a rather nasty one. Father wonders who is going to darn his socks for him. You don't, but that's the only difference between you. You'll both have to get your socks darned somehow."

"I dare say we shall," said Euan. The next letter from Enid referred to a young man at the tennis club who had made a half-hearted attempt on her virtue and had been virtuously repulsed. He chuckled, and put the little scribble aside to be kept.

"I never thought," said Lucy, "that I should break up the house like this."

"Nor did I," said Euan absently. He lowered his eyes to the next letter and read there: "You always strike me as being rather simple-minded." He said to himself: "I'll keep that as a warning," and put it by his side on the bed.

"Euan," said Lucy, "you don't want these old blue sock-suspenders, do you? The elastic is perished."

"Just as you think. Will you get me another pair?"

"Do you want me to send them to your new address?"

"No, I suppose not. I'll go and get a pair myself."

"Will you?"

"Of course I will." He was stung by her tone. "I know all about buying things in shops. You go in and ask for what you want, and they show it you, and then you pay the money and they wrap it up into a parcel——"

"Are you being sarcastic, Euan? The part you'll never do is the going into a shop. I don't want you to walk the streets with your socks falling over the tops of your shoes."

"I won't do that." He returned to Enid's letters.

"Euan!"

"Yes?"

"I thought you were going through those papers to get rid of them."

"Well, that's what I am doing."

"No, you aren't. You've been at them nearly an hour; you aren't half-way through, and you haven't thrown away anything yet."

"I'll begin now," said Euan briskly. He took a couple of post-cards in Phyllis's writing, tore them across and threw the halves into the waste-paper basket. "Does that satisfy you?"

"I only want to get finished before Herbert comes."

"Oh, Herbert!" Euan picked up another letter from Enid and began to wonder what its enigmatic phrases referred to. It might have been, he thought, that queer week-end at Rye, when she had forgotten the wedding-ring.

"Euan!"

"Yes, what is it?"

"You'll be nice to Herbert when he comes, won't you?"

"Lucy, my dear," cried Euan, in a sudden burst of feeling, "don't talk like that. Why on earth shouldn't I be?"

"I know you don't think much of him."

Euan was uncertain how he should answer this, and another of Enid's enigmatic phrases had caught his eye.

He particularly wanted to puzzle out what it meant, but he dared not let his gaze drop to the scribbled sheet in his hand. He stared at his sister hopelessly, hoping that he looked benevolently ironical.

"Oh, get on with your letters, do," said Lucy, after a moment's silence. "I don't know why they aren't tied up with pink ribbons." She turned again to the trunk and, breathing rather fast, thrust down the side a pair of shoes which she had wrapped up in tissue-paper.

She was still impatiently wedging them into place when there was a fluttering knock at the door.

"Herbert's here, Lucy," said the timid voice of Auntie Mabel without.

"Damn the man!" exclaimed his future wife. "Put him somewhere and tell him I'll be down in a minute."

Auntie Mabel was heard retreating. "I'll have to finish in the morning," said Lucy, rising and vigorously dusting her hands. "There isn't much more. And if you'll put all those papers in a heap, I'll make a parcel of them and you can take them as they are. Do you want to take that picture of Romeo and Juliet with you?"

"Good God, no!" he cried, thoroughly aroused. "Why should I?"

"Well, why not? It's yours. Auntie Mabel gave it you for a birthday present years ago. She often says how nicely you thanked her for it, and how glad she is you still like it enough to keep it in your room."

"Does she, though?" Euan's face fell. He saw himself dogged by the picture to his new rooms, since to jettison it would be to hurt Auntie Mabel's feelings.

"Don't worry. I'll wrap it up and put it with the things that are going into store."

"Thanks, old girl," said Euan gratefully. "She'll never know, will she?"

"I hope not," Lucy replied. "I must go now. Do come down if you think you can be polite to Herbert."

"Of course I can. Where are you going?"

"To the pictures. Don't keep supper waiting. He doesn't like missing the news-reel."

A good trait in Herbert, thought Euan, not to want to hang about the house. He went and washed his hands. As he went downstairs he paused for a moment at Lucy's door and heard her moving about hastily. In the sitting-room (formerly the schoolroom, and, in primitive times, the nursery) he found his future brother-in-law. Herbert Thoday was a tall and spare young man with the face of a responsible-minded horse. Euan had not dared to ask, but guessed that he was a year or two younger than Lucy. In spite of his youth, he was managing clerk to a middling but very respectable firm of solicitors. He was business-like. He dressed to suit his position rather than his years. Euan surveyed him, and knew that he had been home to wash and put on a clean collar before taking his fiancée to the pictures.

"Have a drink?" said Euan, taking the lean, cold hand that was extended to him.

"Good evening," said Herbert. "No, thanks, I never drink before supper."

"Cigarette?"

"I won't spoil my appetite, thanks," said Herbert.

"I'm going to have a drink," Euan murmured distractedly, though he did not want one. He went to the door and shouted: "Auntie Mabel, is there any beer about?" He returned, sat down, and looked at Herbert across the sham Persian rug which, in front of the gas-fire, covered the comparatively new oilcloth.

"I've had a busy day," said Herbert. "We're very full up just now, and I had to find time to go and look at that property. Yes, at Fulcher's Green."

Euan looked a question.

"Yes," Herbert went on, "I think it'll do. Lucy will have to come and see it, of course. Women always want to count up the cupboards—and very sensible too. Yes, I think it will suit—at my price, of course." He stretched out his legs in their striped trousers and pressed his hands on the slight bagginess at the knees. "The owner has the wrong idea so far. He wants to get back what he paid for the property."

" I thought," said Euan, for the sake of saying something, " that house property was a very safe form of investment."

" Not unless you know how to buy. No, there's no safe form of investment unless you know how to buy. Now, there's a chap in our office——"

Auntie Mabel entered with a tray on which were a pint bottle of ale and two glasses. Lucy, spruced and brisk, came behind her.

" Euan," said Lucy, " why can't you get your beer for yourself instead of disturbing Auntie Mabel? She's got other things to do. How are you, Herbert? " Herbert kissed her decorously on the cheek.

" It's all right, Lucy," said Auntie Mabel. " Supper's nearly ready. And—and," she added, with a suspicion of a sob as she slipped through the door, " it's his last night, you know."

Herbert sat down again, once more stretched out his long thin legs in the striped trousers, and once more pressed his lean hands on the bagginess in the knees. " Yes," he said, " you're moving out to-morrow, aren't you, Euan? Now, it's none of my business, but I should have thought that was hardly economic. No, not economic."

" Euan thought," Lucy remarked, " that if he had to go he might as well go while he felt like it. And he did feel like it."

" Now I should have thought," said Herbert, " that it would have been better for you and Father and Auntie Mabel to have made a home together—at any rate, until you wanted to get married. There's nothing like a home, I always think."

" There's a second glass here," said Euan. " Won't you change your mind? "

" No, I won't spoil my appetite. Thanks very much."

Lucy was about to say something, stopped suddenly and cocked an attentive ear towards the door.

" Has Auntie Mabel dropped something? " Euan asked. He knew that when this happened there was

apt to be a scene, and he feared for the effect on Herbert, whose courtship of Lucy had been rather rapid, and who might not yet know all that there was to be known about her.

She frowned at him, raising a silencing finger. Then she relaxed and said gloomily: " It's Father. I thought I heard his key. Why should he want to come home so early? "

" I'm glad he has," Herbert said. " Yes, I want to see more of Mr. Cartaret. I've been unlucky in missing him so often. After all, we're in the same profession, aren't we, though the branches are different? I expect we shall have a lot to talk about when we get to know one another better."

" Supper's nearly ready, dears," said Auntie Mabel, through the half-opened door. " I shall have to lay another place for Father."

They went down to the basement and found Mr. Cartaret, legs apart, before the gas-fire.

" Ah, Herbert," he said, with a majestic nod. His voice was quite steady and hardly at all thick, and his eyes were really not badly blood-shot. " Come to try my daughter's cooking, eh? That's right. Come as often as you like."

" We're going to the pictures, sir," said Herbert. " Yes, we haven't much time, have we, Lucy? " He looked at his watch.

" No doubt," Mr. Cartaret said with ill-tempered dignity, " my sister-in-law is providing food for you as quickly as she can."

" What's on to-night, Herbert? " Lucy asked hurriedly.

" Why, I told you, Lucy. Surely you remember? But I did," he went on as she shook her head. " Yes, when you rang me up this morning. It's Moyna Barry and Hal Cooper in ' Set to Partners.' Moyna is said to be very daring in this one," Herbert recited solemnly. " But I don't think Hal Cooper quite suits her. By the way, I see another English actress is knocking them, as they say, in Hollywood. Yes, her name is Barbara

Lackland. She's getting her five thousand dollars a week—that's a thousand pounds. It makes one proud to be an Englishman, doesn't it? And they don't pay anything like the income-tax we do," he added dreamily.

"Euan knows her," Lucy interjected.

"Do you?" Herbert's eyes were almost complete globes with wonder and respect.

"Used to," Euan grunted. "Never could stand the woman."

"I know her too," said Mr. Cartaret.

"Do you really, Mr. Cartaret?" And indeed it seemed that Herbert's eyes could only with difficulty be retained in their sockets.

"I told her not to go to Hollywood," Mr. Cartaret stated. "I told her that it would be the ruin of her. She quite saw that. But somebody got at her afterwards, and then—the lure of big money, you know. It's a thankless job, criticism." He shrugged his shoulders. "You discover a young actress who might do almost anything if she listened to the proper advice, and what does she do? She goes to Hollywood. Lucy, I thought our—our meal was supposed to be ready?"

"You weren't expected," Lucy replied. "I dare say Auntie Mabel is a bit flustered. She had to do everything because I was packing for Euan."

"Oh," said Mr. Cartaret balefully. Herbert looked at his watch.

"I'm so sorry," said Auntie Mabel, entering with the supper. "I'm so sorry, dear. I do hope Herbert hasn't been waiting." This with an imploring glance to Lucy, though it was evident that Herbert could not have been doing anything else, and that the others had been waiting too. "It's the knives, you know. You know, Tom, I've always told you we haven't got enough knives. Oh, dear, of course it doesn't matter now, does it?" She laid a place for Mr. Cartaret with desperate dabbing movements.

"Well, good people," Herbert said, moving towards the table, "I'm hungry. What do you say?" He

looked at his watch again. Lucy frowned at him, but imperceptibly hastened the others to their seats. She dealt out the liver and bacon, which Mr. Cartaret regarded with distaste.

They ate for some time in silence. Then Herbert gathered the last morsels on to his fork, and, before raising them to his mouth, said: "I think we've just time, after all, Lucy."

"Oh," cried Auntie Mabel, "there's a fruit salad."

"I won't, thanks," said Herbert firmly. "Are you going to have fruit salad, Lucy?"

"No, dear. Just give me a minute to put my things on."

Auntie Mabel hovered round them to the door and returned to put the fruit salad on the table for Mr. Cartaret and Euan. "I think they're in time," she said. "It does annoy Herbert so when he misses the news-reel."

"Fruit salad, Mabel?" said Mr. Cartaret, gripping a spoon in his right hand.

"I'm going to make you coffee," Auntie Mabel announced. She went out.

"Fruit salad, my boy?"

"God forbid," said Euan piously.

"Disgusting stuff," said Mr. Cartaret. The fruit salad stood on the table, unanimously despised and neglected.

"Have you a cigarette, my boy?"

Euan produced a packet, took a cigarette from it himself, and passed it on to his father.

"Here's your coffee," said Auntie Mabel brightly, a few moments later. She poured it out for them and began to clear the table. "Aren't you going to drink your coffee?" she asked, a little less brightly, as she went out with the tray.

Mr. Cartaret drank his and choked. "Ugh—ugh—ugh," he coughed. "Why is it that no English-woman——" His voice disappeared amid laryngeal paroxysms.

"Can't see anything wrong with it," said Euan, swallowing the grounds like a man. He rose hastily before his father could recover and went upstairs to continue sorting papers.

An hour saw the end of that occupation, but it was early yet, and he had an obscure desire to talk again with Lucy before he went to bed for the last time in the house in which he had been born. He undid the string with which he had so neatly tied up Enid's letters, and looked at a page here and there. Enid had been a good sort, he reflected, not like Phyllis, who wanted everything and gave nothing except what she gave to everyone. His natural sense of justice pulled him up and made him own that she had asked nothing of him, except perhaps (and, at that, only perhaps) what he had been too eager to give her.

He was sunk in the task of being perfectly just to Phyllis when he heard footsteps and voices distinct in the suburban night. He went to the landing-window and beheld the leave-taking of Lucy and her Herbert. Twice he saw her try to pull herself away. At the third attempt she was successful, and she ran up the steps and pushed her key into the lock. But she turned in the open door and cried: "Good night, dear, sleep well."

Euan made one jump to his own room and came out of it innocently when he heard her feet on the stairs. "Hullo, old girl," he said. "I've just finished. I suppose you wouldn't like to make me some tea?"

She put her arm in his and led him downstairs. They went into the kitchen and she boiled a kettle on the gas-stove. She made tea and drank a cup of it while he drank two. But they had nothing to say to one another.

"You'll be dreadfully tired in the morning," she said at last.

"I dare say I shall," he agreed. "We'd better be going up."

"You go on. I want to put these things away."

He hesitated for a moment and went. At the turn of the stairs he wondered whether it was sobbing that he

heard below. He continued, and reached his room to which the packed but unfastened trunks gave an unfamiliar and disquieting appearance. He put his clothes for the last time in their usual places, pulled the light-cord, and, for the last time in that house, went to sleep.

III

Mona did not recognise her luck when she met Huffy Tellus that evening in Regent Street. She tried to dodge but she failed because Huffy saw something very odd in her face and was resolved to know more about it.

Then Mona, with the small, determined Huffy standing squarely in her way, said: " Hullo, I'll have to get on, because I'm late. Isn't this rain beastly? " She noticed that it hurt her face when she spoke as though the skin had been stretched tight between her eyes and the corners of her mouth.

Huffy said: " Why don't you put up your umbrella? "

Mona looked down at the umbrella dangling from her wrist and knew herself to be betrayed. " I must hurry," she said weakly.

" No, you don't," Huffy asserted. " I'm just going home and I'm going a bust on a taxi. You'd better come with me."

Mona muttered something in excuse, but at that moment a taxi stopped beside them and she felt herself pushed into it. When she was inside, she realized that it had been raining hard. The wet stood on her coat and hat, and her ankles were soaked and chilly. She shivered a little and then relaxed. She need not think for a little while. She would go with Huffy and have a cup of tea and get warm. After that she would go home, and then it would be time for her to think.

They slid along for a little while through the damp, light-streaked darkness, until at last Huffy said tentatively: " Whatever it is, Harry will be able to think of something."

As she spoke, she could feel the other girl stiffening convulsively in her corner. "No, no," Mona cried. "You mustn't say anything to Harry about it. Promise me you won't?"

Huffy promised soothingly. To herself she said: "That means she's going to tell me. But, oh dear, I'm afraid it must be a baby. It can't be anything else. Will Harry be able to think of anything about that?" For, highly as she esteemed her husband, she knew that there are limits to human wisdom. To her companion she said no more until they reached Rutland Terrace.

Ten minutes later she had Mona, wrapped in a comfortable dressing-gown, warming her bare feet at one side of a fire which Huffy's quick fingers had coaxed into an instant blaze, while her wet clothes were drying at the other.

"I'm going to make some tea," said Huffy. "Here's something silly for you to look at."

Mona found herself gazing at the pages of an illustrated paper and trying to gather from mysterious captions the plot of the new play at the Charing Theatre. She thought that to the end of her life she would remember the grouping of the figures in the scene in which Walter Monnery found his new leading lady, Miss Daisy Warren, so flagrantly, yet, as it turned out, so innocently, in the arms of the second footman. They advanced from the page towards her, and receded, in nightmare fashion.

Then Huffy returned with the tea-tray, and Mona found that the strain in her mind was miraculously easier. Without knowing what she did, she put up her hand to her face to feel whether the skin was as tight as it had been. It seemed not to be.

"I'm going to cook crumpets," said Huffy, "and put more butter on them than's good for me. Do you like salt and pepper with them?"

Mona said that she wouldn't eat anything—said it with a little faint smile and a little faint shake of the head. But she changed her mind when Huffy had toasted the first crumpet, and was surprised to discover

that she was disappointed when the last crumpet had gone.

Huffy rose and turned out the lights. The fire had sunk to a soft, bluely flickering glow. "Now, Mona," said Huffy in a very gentle voice. Mona made a small motion of denial. Her expression suggested a mind drowsing at peace.

"Go on, Mona," Huffy whispered, still gently but insistently. "You're feeling better now but you won't when you're home again, you know, if you haven't got it off your mind."

"I don't know how to tell you." Huffy was wisely silent. "It's about David, mostly."

"So it is a baby, then," thought Huffy with a sinking heart. She wished she knew a little more about babies.

"You know we've been about together rather a lot lately?" Huffy nodded and hoped that presently it would be vouchsafed to her to guess who David might be. "Well, that's what the trouble is about."

The silence lasted for so long that it seemed to Huffy that Mona must believe the whole story to have been told, and that she must fill in the gaps for herself.

"I don't know much about it myself," she hazarded, "and it sounds a horrid idea, but I do know that there are ways of getting rid of them. Perhaps Harry could find out something about it."

"Get rid of what?" asked Mona crossly. "It sounds as though I had spots on my face."

Huffy was bewildered and was not best pleased to hear Harry stamping in the hall. "Damn that man!" she muttered. "Why must he come home early just to-night?"

She rose with the intention of dealing firmly with her husband, but Mona caught at her sleeve in a panic of desperation. "Huffy," she cried, "can't you send him away somewhere? I do want to talk to you!"

"Of course I will, darling." She leant to brush with a warm kiss the cheek that had now grown tight and painful again.

Mona mechanically picked up the illustrated paper and saw the little photographed figures dancing to and fro fantastically. She also heard the two spouses in conversation outside the half-open door.

"All right, my dear," Harry was saying. "Have I to go to bed? Or will it do if I have a bath? Or shall I go and cook something in the kitchen? That seems to exhaust all the possibilities."

"Don't be a fool, darling. Just go up to the next floor and see how Euan's getting on. I'll bring up something to drink in a moment. He hasn't got anything and I promised I would, anyway."

"Oh, he's turned up, has he?" There was more satisfaction in Harry's tones.

"Yes, he came this afternoon and he's still getting his things straight. You can help him."

"I can tell him what to do but I'm not going to shift furniture. Don't forget that drink, will you? And, by the way, don't fix up anything for to-night. I want to talk to you. No, nothing disagreeable."

Huffy came back and knelt at a cupboard, while Mona reflected bitterly: "The last time I saw Euan he wanted to make a reconciliation between David and me. I wonder whether he'd like to try it now."

"I shan't be long," cried Huffy, who was precariously hugging several bottles of beer to her bosom.

Mona went on with her speculations. "I wonder what he's doing here. I thought he lived with his people somewhere. He can't be going to marry that Blabey girl. Her father would never let them live in a place like this. Unless, of course, she's had the guts to run away with him. . . . She doesn't look as though she had. . . ."

The little interlude had made her calmer and more at her ease when Huffy settled down again on the hearth-rug at her feet. She began almost without effort. "I suppose I knew," she said, "that it couldn't go on like that for ever. I did sometimes think . . . But he couldn't have afforded to run away with me. He said

his wife would never give him a divorce, but it wasn't that. He knew he couldn't earn a living, and I knew he couldn't either. That's humiliating, isn't it, Huffy? But I did know it—really."

Huffy put out her hand in a gentle caress to Mona, who went on, her voice growing slightly more hard: "But I wouldn't have believed that he would have given up like that and exposed me——" She shivered and was silent for a moment. "I don't know how much they found out for themselves. I think he must have told them a lot of it. But she did find out first through private detectives."

"Who is she?" Huffy asked.

"Lady Kirkmabreck," Mona answered, and a good deal of illumination entered Huffy's puzzled mind. But at the same time she lowered her eyes so that the fire-light should not betray her surprise and disappointment.

That poor little man! And, now she came to think of it, she had seen them together rather much lately, had even joked about it with Harry once. But she had never paid any attention to it. She had been inclined to be rather romantic about Mona, and had hoped to see her having a beautiful affair with, say, someone as like Harry as it was reasonable to hope for. Mona was so pretty, so gay, dressed so cleverly! What could have interested her in the parrot-faced David of whom every-one else spoke contemptuously as "Kirkie"? *Could* it have been the fact that he was an Earl? Could he (the terrible thought crossed Huffy's mind) have been keeping her out of the meagre pocket-money his wife was said to give him? But having crossed her mind, it passed out at the other side and vanished for ever.

Her heart softened again when Mona continued, all hardness gone: "We used to laugh and joke together about the idea of our being followed. We never thought we were. I suppose we thought it was so much our own business what we were doing, and—and—I don't know how to put it, Huffy, we thought we were two little people having a good time by ourselves and no

one could possibly bother about us. Do you understand, Huffy? We didn't think we were doing anyone any harm. I *still* don't think we were."

"Darling," Huffy murmured, cherishing the girl's limp hand. "Were you very much in love with him?"

"No, I don't think I was," Mona said frankly. "It wasn't a bit like Timmie." Huffy discreetly refrained from asking any questions about Timmie. "But I *was* fond of him, and, oh, Huffy, I am going to miss him so! She isn't kind to him, I don't believe anyone was ever kind to him but me. She used to order him about —I suppose she's ordering him about now." She sobbed a little, and Huffy felt profoundly unhappy and profoundly helpless. "I used to order him about too," she reflected, "but he liked the way I did it."

After that she said nothing for so long that Huffy at last had to prompt her. "What happened to-day?" she asked.

"That was the worst of all," Mona cried, starting as though she had been physically hurt. "They came to the shop."

"Who came?"

"Two horrible men. I suppose they were solicitors, or something. She must have made them do that. It wasn't necessary. They could have written to me. I would have gone to see them if they'd wanted. They just walked in and forced their way into my room, and told me—they told me——" She sat up rigidly, pulling her hand from Huffy's soft, comforting grasp. "They told me that Lord Kirkmabreck didn't want to see me any more. They didn't let me off anything. They said that if we continued our—our relations, he'd be divorced and that would ruin him. So much for his story that she wouldn't give him a divorce. I couldn't get a word out, and the younger one thought he had to argue with me. He said he was sure I would see that if that happened Lord Kirkmabreck wouldn't be best pleased with me. The other one was nicer: I think he was sorry for me. He did stop the younger one trying to give

me money. But they needn't have come to the shop. That was just cruelty!"

"Never mind," said Huffy, recovering Mona's hand. "It's all over now."

"But it isn't!" Mona exclaimed bitterly. "I've lost my job. At least, I'm sure I have."

"Oh, dear," said Huffy in dismay.

"Madame came in just as they were going away. She wanted to know whether they were customers. They didn't look like it, you know." Here Mona was overcome by a tragic little giggle. "I told her they'd come to see me on private business. I couldn't think of anything else. But she said she knew they'd come about my—my relations with Lord Kirkmabreck. And she said a lot more that I couldn't listen to."

"Did she give you notice?"

"I don't know. I tell you, I didn't listen. But I suppose she did. Anyway, I'm not going back there to-morrow. I couldn't."

"But, darling," said Huffy, "what you do outside the shop is none of her business. She couldn't dismiss you without notice for that."

"She thinks that Lady Kirkmabreck won't deal there again. Not that it would be any loss if she didn't. She always beats the price down to the last farthing and then eats up the profit with alterations. But she'll tell her friends not to go there because the manageress will—will sleep with their husbands."

"I suppose you'll be dismissed, anyway," Huffy said thoughtfully, "with or without notice. Are things all right? I mean—will you be able to manage till you find another job?"

"N-n-no, I sh-shan't," Mona wailed, her face suddenly convulsed. She dropped her head almost to her knees and uttered, between sobs: "Everything's come at once. I haven't got any money, and I'm dreadfully in debt. I never took anything from David, you do believe that, don't you, Huffy? Except once a dress—and once a hat—and once a string of beads I didn't really want,

only I'd said I liked it. But I wanted nice things when I was going out with him, and I spent money without thinking what I was doing. There's an awful bill at Elspeth's."

"Let them sue," said the practical Huffy. "But that will swallow up your week's notice."

"And then I ran up a bill at Mimi's. There's a girl there who was at school with me, and she knew I was in the trade, so they gave me credit. It didn't any of it seem to matter till now. I *knew*, I tell you, I *did* know that David and I wouldn't go on like that for ever. But I didn't think it was going to stop."

By now Huffy was erect on her knees with arms tight round the weeping girl, and at this touching illogicality she drew them tighter.

"And now I don't know what I'm going to do. I've pawned nearly everything I can. And—and I had a summons this morning from Mimi. I was just wondering whether I *could* borrow the money from David, and then——"

"Harry," said Huffy triumphantly, "will know exactly what to do about that. We'll ask him."

She stood up, but Mona clutched her wrist. "Huffy, you won't tell Harry about anything but the summons? You promise you won't?"

"I promise I won't," Huffy lied tranquilly. How was the girl to be helped if Harry did not know what her trouble was? And, after all, though Mona might not know it, telling anything to her was really the same thing as telling it to Harry: the transference of the knowledge from one to another was a mere formality. Harry was, besides, if anything, too discreet: he did sometimes think that he ought not to repeat his friends' confidences to her. "Have you got the summons with you?"

"It's in my bag somewhere."

"Come and do your face up, darling," said Huffy, "while I fetch those men downstairs. Then you can show it to Harry and he'll tell you what to do. I don't

expect you'll have to pay it for a long time." She put her arms warmly round Mona again and reached up a little to kiss her. Then she drew her into the bathroom. " There isn't much room," she said; " I shall be thankful when we move, if only so that we have a bathroom where you can get out of the bath to dry yourself. We have to stand in it while the water runs out. Then you can go into the bedroom and dress. I'll keep them out of the way."

Leaving Mona with another kiss, Huffy ran upstairs and into Euan's sitting-room. Euan rose guiltily from the arm-chair in which he was sprawling, while Harry, with perfect calm, continued to sprawl. The table was pushed aside and an open crate of books and half its spilt contents occupied the middle of the floor.

This untidiness seemed odd in the midst of the chill mahogany of the solidly furnished room. Huffy gazed without approval at the table with the runner down the middle, at the huge china jar which stood by the fire-place, and at the marble clock.

" I warned you about the furniture, Euan," she said. " But we'll soon make it look more liveable."

" Oh, what's wrong with it?" Euan asked in surprise.

" Nearly everything. I don't believe you've any idea how to make yourself comfortable. You want a woman to look after you."

Harry observed dreamily from the depths of his arm-chair: " Don't you think, Euan, that because you've read that before in a book, it doesn't mean anything when Huffy says it. If you want to be married, well and good. If you don't, put us out of your lives. I shall miss you, but what is my happiness beside the claims of friendship?" He ran his hand across his eyes and affected to shake the resultant moisture on to the floor. " We will have the firm silent handclasp when I get up," he added. " Not now."

Huffy smiled at him tenderly and said to Euan: " Is that all the unpacking you've done?"

"I've got everything I want for the night," he replied hastily. "I brought them all in a suit-case."

"And that means that your clothes are still in your trunks?"

He guiltily admitted that it did.

"Are they unlocked? Very well, I'll get out the worst of them. I hope you've got hangers for them." She disappeared into the bedroom.

"I say," said Euan uneasily, "do you think I'm imposing on Huffy?"

"I think," said Harry, "that she wants you to do something for her and now you'll have to do it."

"Of course I will. What is it?"

"At a guess, I should say she wants you to marry Mona Fenwick."

Euan grinned. "She's a pretty kid, that," he observed. "But——"

Harry cocked a wise eye at him but said only: "We'll finish the beer while Huffy's busy." They finished the beer.

"There are two suits saved, anyway," said Huffy, returning, "and your dress-clothes. I say, Harry, isn't it wonderful? He has two pairs of dress-trousers, haven't you, Euan?"

"Fop," remarked Harry. "But it's no good to us. They won't fit me."

"I know, but isn't it wonderful? Now, look here, you've both got to be very nice to Mona. She's feeling rather sad. She wants you to advise her, Harry." Harry groaned. "She's had a summons." Harry brightened a little. "And, Euan, it would be very sweet of you to take her out to dinner. You haven't arranged for anything here, have you? I wouldn't go to the Bran Pie. Somewhere near, because you'll have a lot to do to-night, won't you?" She looked expressively round the dishevelled room. "We'd make a party together but Harry and I have got something to look after too. You would like to do that, Euan, wouldn't you?"

Mona, in the bedroom, drawing on her stockings

before the comfortable little gas-fire, heard them come down, and a sense of chilliness swept over her. She did not want to face the two men. She thought that most of all she wanted to get into the bed behind her and sleep and sleep and not wake until all her troubles were over and her mind at rest again.

She knew that in time she would think no more of David, would even be able to remember his betrayal without this horrible pricking heat and cold all over her body, but that was no consolation. The time was not yet. She felt that her deserted state was placarded on her breast. She knew very well in what esteem other men were wont to hold her faithless lover and supposed they would regard her with contempt for having yielded to him and with more for having been thrown over by him. For a moment she hated Harry and Euan. Then she worked rapidly before the mirror on the dressing-table and went into the sitting-room, not forgetting to take with her the bag that had the summons in it.

Harry looked at the complicated document with the eye of a connoisseur. "Don't worry," he said at last. "This gives you plenty of time. Leave it with me and I'll tell you what to do. Will you be at the Bran Pie to-morrow night?" He caught Huffy's warning eye and stopped, conscious only that he had made some mistake.

But Mona said: "Yes, I shall, and thank you very much, Harry. Only don't take too much trouble about it." She looked perceptibly more cheerful.

Euan said, with a conscientious lightness of tone: "They want to get rid of us, Mona, so we'd better be going. If you'll be so kind to me, that is. This is my first real bachelor evening, you know."

She smiled her gratitude at the flattering clumsiness. "I'm ready if you are," she said. "Huffy, where did I put my hat?"

When they were gone, Harry put his arms round Huffy's neck, leant half his weight on her shoulders and

demanded: "Well, little pig, what do you want to tell me?"

"What do you want to tell me?"

"Tell yours first."

"We'll keep them both till we can sit down to supper." But she left the kitchen-door open, and, darting in and out, contrived to tell him the whole story before the table was fairly laid.

"Her own affair," he said, when he was sure that he had got the main facts. "No telling what you women will do, is there? You'll be running off with Bertie Farwig next—or Horace Griffin—or old Damara—or Ridgeway Rowland. No, that wouldn't do. You'd never get a word in and you'd burst with suppressed conversation. I know! Sir Maurice Blabey! Have you ever noticed, darling, that when eminent financiers go pop and fly the country they always fly with someone they're not married to? Adds a touch of romance and gets them a better Press. Doesn't get 'em lighter sentences, though."

"Don't be silly, Harry. What do you mean about Sir Maurice?"

"I always had a hunch about that man, and now there are some nasty rumours. Doesn't matter to us, though. I foiled all his efforts to help me. Mona's much more important. Whatever made her do it?"

"She felt sorry for him, I think." Huffy plumped their supper down on the table. "I told you I'd get the onions crisp one day if I went on trying. Look at them. But, Harry, she's very miserable and there's nothing to laugh at."

"I can't do anything about her broken heart," said Harry, cutting firmly across a juicy steak. "But I can get her a job. Old Dykes, of Dykes & Wallace, told me he wanted a reception-clerk. Said I must know lots of pretty girls—what do you think of that, darling? It's right up her street. And I say, old girl, things aren't too bad just now, so you could lend her two or three quid if you wanted to." She jumped up from her steak

and onions and embraced him. "All right, and thank you very much. By the way, why did you scowl at me like a dyspeptic tortoise when I suggested meeting her at the club?"

"She used to go there with David, as she calls him," Huffy explained. "She won't want to go there again for a little while."

"Rot," said Harry. "If she doesn't go there how will she find another little playmate?"

"Harry, you're a beast."

"I'm not. I like Mona just as much as you do, but I've got no illusions about her. And don't you go making plans for Euan to marry her."

"He's quarrelled with Phyllis Blabey," she said defensively.

"I dare say. But he won't marry Mona. That's flat." He pushed his plate in one direction and his chair in the other, feeling complacently that this was a really vulgar action. "Now it's my turn," he said.

"Oh, yes, darling. I'm so sorry."

"It's nothing, really. But I was sent for to head-office to-day." He paused to give this its full effect. "I'm to go in there for a few months to learn that side of the work." He paused again and Huffy looked puzzled. "Mustn't count on it," he explained, "but as a matter of fact, I know the sales-manager is resigning next year."

"You don't mean——" said Huffy, her eyes growing wider and wider.

"No, I don't. But still I've got a chance."

They spent the next half-hour together in the big arm-chair before the fire. Huffy was happily drowsing when Harry lifted her off his knees, rumpled her untidy fair hair into a mop, and said that he wanted a drink.

"What would you like, darling?" she asked anxiously. "I think there's some of that Benedictine left. Wouldn't you like some? I should."

They drank little glasses of Benedictine, she now huddling at his feet.

" I do wish," she said, " that Mona could get comfortably settled."

" Euan wants a little playmate as much as she does," he murmured. " Leave them alone and they'll be happy. Come on, child, and I'll help you to wash up."

" I'd sooner you played something while I do it."

Harry sat down at the pianola and rendered *La Cathédrale Engloutie* with great feeling.

Mona and Euan, guided by Huffy's instruction, found a clean restaurant in the neighbourhood, and there dined rather stiffly together. Each was a little disappointed with the other.

She, conscious that tears had left her red-eyed and hoarse, was subdued and seemed prim. He knew only that he had expected something which persisted in not happening. Her primness affected him like a snub to advances which he had not come near making. In long intervals of silence he stared at her white throat, the sheen of which made him think of gold, though it was not golden. It rose from a simple blue dress, which had some sort of embroidery on the breast in green, and another shade of blue. Her eyes were so steadfastly on her plate that he felt safe in looking at her. But, when he lifted his gaze to consider the meaning of her wide, softly modelled lips, she suddenly looked back at him and flushed hotly. After that, they made conversation, jerkily indeed, but without lapses.

They finished at last, and Mona said that it was too early for there to be any need for a taxi, or indeed for him to take her home at all. But he insisted on at least escorting her in the Tube.

It was not much after ten when he duly brought her to her door in Gilderoy Street.

" Good night, Mona," he said.

" Good night, Euan," she said.

She lifted her mouth to him as simply as a child, and in the same spirit he kissed it. Then she went up to her room and threw herself on the bed and sobbed:

"Oh, David, David, David," for some time, until she felt she must reprove herself for theatricality. But she found that, theatricality or not, it did her no good to reprove herself because she still wanted David.

When she was in bed she coiled herself up, with her knees under her chin and her face half-buried in the pillow, and arranged for herself a marvellous waking dream. In it David sought her out and told her that the two men had come to her without his authority and that he had never thought of giving her up. In fact, he wanted her to run away with him, and Gladys had promised to give him his freedom. Everything would be all right, because someone had unexpectedly left him an enormous fortune. . . . Mona cried a little and went to sleep much earlier than she usually did, and in the morning felt better than usual because she had had a long night.

Euan walked back to Rutland Terrace and, seeing no light in the Telluses' windows and hearing no sound in their flat, also went early to bed. The sitting-room did not invite him to sit in it. Both it and the bedroom, now that he came to look at them, were as cheerless as Huffy had implied. But, he supposed, he would spend more time in going out than he had done in the past: the Bran Pie would be very convenient. The food was cheap and not too bad, and he could always depend on meeting there someone whom he knew.

IV

"Evening, sir," said Bray, as Horace Griffin entered the club. "Excuse me, sir, just a moment, if you please."

Horace was enticed by the mysterious expression on that large, square face behind the counter and into the shelter of a hat-rack. "I just thought I'd ask you, sir," Bray rumbled, "but Mr. Farwig's in the committee-room already, sitting at the table. I knew you'd let him come back into the club, but——"

"That's all right, Bray," said Horace heartily. "Quite right to tell me. I've put him back on the committee, too. No malice, that's our motto here, Bray." He laughed, but the watchful Bray did not miss a certain darkening of his expression. Perhaps Horace himself felt that his heartiness had sounded a little thin, for he added: "Filthy evening, isn't it? I think I've got a chill, or something."

"You don't wrap up warm enough, sir," said Bray. Going out in the open car, a muffler isn't enough on nights like this. Now a little hot rum, sir——"

"Beer, though I die for it," Horace exclaimed with tragic intensity. "Rum makes me think of going over the top. Do you ever remember those days, Bray?"

"Those were the days, sir," Bray averred.

"They were—and, by God, didn't we long for them to be over? And didn't we think that life would be as easy as grease when they were? Do you know, Bray, that we've got several members in the club who weren't old enough to fight? Grown up, they are, and taking girls out to dinner, and lowering their liquor like men."

"The world moves on, sir," Bray averred.

"So it does, Bray, so it does," Horace agreed admiringly. "No one could have put it better—not even Mr. Rowland himself. In fact, he would have put it much worse, because he'd have spun it out to a couple of columns. He can't afford, as you can, Bray, to condense these great truths into mere epigrams."

"No, sir," said Bray. "I dare say you're right."

"That's all right, then," Horace assured him. "I'm glad you think as I do. But I daren't leave that man, Farwig, in the committee-room all by himself. If I do, he'll be trying to get a drink before the bar's open, and, committee or no committee, I won't have it."

He departed to supervise the sinful Farwig with all his usual vigour. The committee-room was no other than his own rarely used private office. It had been tidied for the occasion, and the table was neatly set out with pencils and little piles of paper. But there was no

sign of Bertie. Horace, lifting his nose like a hound in quest of scent, decided that he would draw the Bar Parlour first, and, as he expected, found his man there, leaning on the counter and arguing with fat Philip.

" But I'm on the committee again," he was saying.

" You won't even be a member long," Horace interrupted, " if you give me all this trouble. Come out of it and leave Philip alone. He's got plenty to do before the bar opens."

He shepherded Bertie back to the committee-room, where they saw George Bullace intent over some papers and scribbling figures at his right hand from time to time.

" I hope the others aren't going to be late," said Bullace, without raising his head. " We've got a good deal in front of us, and I'd like to be through with it." Then he did raise his head and beheld Bertie Farwig. " What have you got there? " he asked.

" It's the best," Horace replied flippantly, " that I can do for you in the way of a committee at present. A poor thing, but mine own. I put him back myself."

" But you can't . . ." Bullace began. Then he stopped and shrugged his shoulders. " I suppose it doesn't matter," he concluded. " Aren't the others coming? "

As he spoke, the others, Ridgeway Rowland and Mr. Damara, came in together. Mr. Damara looked redder-eyed than ever. He had retained his fur-trimmed overcoat and, with his stooped back, seemed to be trying to retire altogether inside it, like a shivering turtle.

" This weather will be the end of me," he coughed, crossing to the stove and holding out his blue hands for warmth to the deceptive glow of the little mica window.

" It's the fires you keep in your studio," said Bertie, " for those models of yours. No wonder you feel it chilly when you come out."

" I suppose Blabey won't be coming, George? " Horace asked.

" Blabey? No, he won't be here."

" Then we might as well begin."

They sat down at the table and went through the usual formalities. When these were done, Horace said: " There's only one matter of importance for us to discuss." He looked at Bullace, who nodded. " It's this infernal County Council business."

" Isn't the bar open yet? " Bertie enquired pathetically.

" I suppose we'd better let Bertie have something to keep him quiet." Horace rang a bell and they gave their orders to a waiter, beer for Horace and Bullace, whisky for Bertie, a dry sherry for Ridgeway Rowland, and a crême de menthe for Mr. Damara.

" There's no doing anything with them," Horace went on, when each member of the committee had his drink beside him. " I've talked to that blasted inspector until my throat went dry. I offered him a drink once—only once. I didn't dare to try it again, so I had to do without a drink myself. And the long and the short of it is that we must have the stairs widened pretty soon or else shut up shop."

" What's it going to cost? " Bullace asked gently.

" I've argued with the builders, too. They say that a proper job, which will pass inspection, will come to six or seven hundred. They won't touch it unless we write them that we're prepared for at least that."

" Well, Horace," said Bullace, still gently, " I looked in at the bank this morning and had a chat with the manager. He pointed out that we're overdrawn a hundred or so beyond Sir Maurice's guarantee."

" Won't Sir Maurice raise the guarantee? " asked Rowland.

" I don't know whether he would or not. But I suggested that as a possibility. The manager didn't take to it, though. He thought something tangible would be more satisfactory. Very polite—bank doesn't like troubling guarantors, has to consider whether it will be made to do what it doesn't like—so on. We shall have to do something special if we want to get six or seven hundred out of the bank."

"But we're a perfectly solvent concern," Horace protested. "We've put all the profits back into the business. We couldn't have done more."

"We put most of it into the roof-garden," Mr. Damara murmured.

Horace, ignoring him, continued: "All clubs have a difficulty in getting their money in. The bank knows that perfectly well."

"Some clubs never do get it in," said Bullace. "The bank knows that perfectly well too."

"It seems to me," said Mr. Damara, mouthing his words delicately, "that, apart from his guarantee, Sir Maurice has invested quite a lot of money in the club. I'm sure he wouldn't like to lose it. Now, if the matter were put to him properly, he would want to find this six or seven hundred. Couldn't he have a mortgage or debentures, or whatever it may be called? I don't profess to understand these technical terms."

"You can rule that out," said Bullace.

The others stared at him, a little surprised by the decision of his tone. "But surely," Ridgeway Rowland began, "that wouldn't be more than a fleabite to him?"

"You can rule it out, nevertheless," Bullace repeated. "It's out of the question."

That peculiar darkening fell once more across Horace's face. "I've no money myself," he said slowly. "But couldn't we here find some way of raising it without troubling Sir Maurice?" His glance, slowly traversing the table, fell first on Bertie Farwig.

"I couldn't raise a penny," cried Bertie, starting convulsively in his chair. "All I've got is in my business. You don't know how bad things are on the Stock Exchange. Good God, what would my partners say if I wanted to take any money out of the firm and put it into a club?"

Horace looked sadly further. Mr. Damara blinked his red eyes and remarked as sadly: "We artists never save anything. A hand-to-mouth existence."

Ridgeway Rowland expressed his sympathy with a smile and said: " I'm only a poor journalist."

" It's the pressure they're putting on us," Bullace murmured, " that makes it so difficult. Next year, say, it might be possible to do something. What I propose is this—that we adjourn now and that our secretary and I discuss it informally, to see whether we can't make some arrangement to keep everybody satisfied for a short time."

" Agreed," said Mr. Damara, and the others warmly echoed: " Agreed! "

Bertie Farwig added: " I think that we ought to do something about overdue subscriptions. Have those Telluses paid theirs? "

Horace Griffin showed his teeth in an ugly grin. " You can leave that to me, Bertie," he said. " I'm a good debt-collector. I'm going to start on all the drinks you've had chalked up in the Bar Parlour."

Bertie made no reply. The members of the committee all rose together and stood about rather awkwardly.

" By the way," said Ridgeway Rowland, taking one of Mr. Damara's cigarettes, " where's that pretty waitress we used to talk about? I've missed her for the last week."

" He means," Bertie explained, amid a dead silence, " the girl we used to call Little Fanny."

" Sacked," said Horace. " Shall we go up and have one or two before dinner? "

They climbed the stairs rather dispiritedly. Hitherto they had met only to register the decisions of a successful management. They had never before been asked to show in any practical way their belief in the wisdom of that management. The mere suggestion had shaken them all. But the Bar Parlour, with its mottoes and its sprouting onions and its roaring fire, a little restored their confidence.

" I've ordered dinner for seven o'clock," said Horace. " That gives us time for a drink or two. Philip! "

There was something twisted about his expression that

attracted the notice even of Ridgeway Rowland, who drew Bertie to the far end of the room and said to him: "What's the matter with Griffin? It isn't only that business of the staircase."

Bertie put a finger to his lips and looked wise. "It isn't," he whispered, "but be careful. You've dropped a pretty jagged half-brick already this evening. The fact is, he's a bit sore about Little Fanny."

"The pretty waitress? But what happened to her?"

Bertie turned and ejaculated over his shoulder: "Double whisky for me, please, Horace." To Ridgeway Rowland he said under his breath: "Horace found her lapped lovingly in the embrace of one of the waiters. He's a quick-tempered fellow, Horace. He sacked both of them on the spot. He was a good waiter and she was a good waitress. But the waiter lost one job and Little Fanny lost two. Only don't say anything about it to Horace."

Carlo came to announce that the committee's dinner was ready to be served. They began to file out, but Mr. Damara detained Horace Griffin with a hand upon his sleeve.

"I understand your loss, Horace," he said. "These misfortunes happen to all of us. Do you know where she is now?"

"I don't know," said Horace, "and I don't give a damn, and I don't know what you're talking about. We've got a sample of alleged Empire caviare that I want the committee to taste."

He thrust Mr. Damara towards the dining-room and turned back himself to the bar.

"A double brandy, please, Philip," he said. He stood there, sipping it. The loss of Little Fanny afflicted him in every nerve. He remembered her perfect legs, he remembered the sharp edge where her sleek hair met the white neck. When he thought of her, it was as though all his skin was raw. He remembered her ignorance and her vulgarity, and the remembrance stung and stimulated him. He wondered what she was doing

now and knew with absolute certainty. Mrs. Badger, in frenzied loyalty to his interests, had ferreted out the whole story and presented it to him.

Little Fanny and the waiter had taken a room in the hinterland of Shaftesbury Avenue and were looking for jobs. They had even gone to the length of getting married. They were to be seen every evening, Mrs. Badger reported, in the Sun and Whalebone, behaving very lover-like. A good many artists went there and, she believed, Little Fanny had an idea that she might become a model. Horace was only too ready to believe that she might.

He wondered what would happen if he were to meet her in the street. He believed that he would be proof against anything but a direct advance from her. But she might make that direct advance, and then it would begin all over again. If only it would!

"Another double brandy, Philip," he ordered.

"Did you say another double brandy, sir?" Philip asked doubtfully.

"I did," Horace affirmed. "and if you look at me like that, I'll make it a quadruple or even a sextuple brandy. Get on with it, you bloody fool. There are some more bloody fools waiting for me at table."

CHAPTER XI

DAY OF JUDGEMENT

I

"It would be interesting to know," said Euan, "how long we are going to be kept doing nothing here."

"I am inclined to think," said Mr. Magsley, "that the Vallonians are cannibals and are fattening us up for their next ritual meal. Do you happen to remember when the moon will be at the full?"

"If we have any more banquets," Euan declared, "I shall die!"

"Luncheons," said Mr. Magsley judicially—"the luncheons are worse than the banquets. After the banquets one goes to bed and, thank God, they do leave us alone at breakfast. After the luncheons one is taken out in a car and expected to show an intelligent interest in Herr Schnaubelheim's factory for the production of glazed tiles. But you mustn't imagine, Euan, that you can become one of the heaven-born without preliminary pangs. You must first die in torment. When you are born again, you will enjoy banquets and luncheons and tile-factories. We have a luncheon today, by the way. Don't be late and do be cheerful."

"Why were we sent here?"

"Because your friend, Sir Maurice Blabey, admires us both so much."

Euan walked sulkily over to the window and surveyed the view commanded by the windows of the best suite in the Hotel Bristol. Mr. Magsley sat where he was and surveyed the thickly upholstered metal furniture of

the best suite in the Hotel Bristol. On the walls hung exquisitely faithful reproductions of some of the masterpieces of Picasso, and for a few moments he looked at them. Then he looked at the ash-tray attached to the arm of his chair, which instantly, by a new and ingenious process, extinguished the cigarette which touched it. Several hardly smoked cigarettes lay there already, faintly and forlornly stinking. Mr. Magsley shook his ash on the carpet.

"There seems to be some excitement over there," Euan said at last. "What's that big building at the corner of the square?"

"Either the Bourse or the State Bank," Mr. Magsley replied. "I suppose the heaven-born are up to something. Don't imagine that you can learn how to make money by watching the way they behave. Their demeanour bears no relation, measurable by scientific methods, to their real actions."

"I shall write a letter," Euan announced in despair.

"Your boredom could not be better expressed," said Mr. Magsley. "I am at a loss. I cannot do crossword puzzles in German. Those in the English papers which I have are beneath contempt, except for one word in the children's puzzle in the *Daily Informer*. I suspect that the composer does not spell very accurately. I think I shall try to take Pi out to three thousand places in my head. Interrupt me if you want to."

Euan sat at the writing-table and began:

DEAR MONA—It was nice to get your card yesterday. I wish that you were here or that I were in London. You might like Ringenstadt, and I'm sure I should like it if you were with me. As it is, I don't. We've been here for eight days and we get no further in anything but eating and drinking. They all make a great fuss of us and expect us to eat more at a meal than I could do with comfortably in a week. We were at a banquet last night. I was sitting next to the Foreign Minister—

He paused here and wondered whether this would look

as though he were trying to show off. He decided that he might as well get that much satisfaction out of his discomforts, and continued:

—and I passed the bird. The old boy said: " Herr Cartaret, you young men pass the bird because you dislike the trouble of picking the bones. That is the only way to enjoy any bird." He thereupon seized a wing and picked it and spat out the bits he didn't want at long range on his plate. Later in the evening he made a complimentary speech about us with one hand on my shoulder. The hotel-valet is trying to get the grease out now.

I don't know why we are being held up like this. Magsley says they are fattening us up and are going to eat us. All the business we came to do could have been done in an hour.

He paused again, because he could think of nothing more to say to Mona. But he did want to say something more to Mona. He went on:

I hope that when I come back (if I ever do come back) you won't have got into the habit of dining with someone else. If I sent you a wire, do you think you could meet me for dinner on the night of my arrival?

He pondered a little longer and finally added, with a hesitating pen: " Yours ever, E.C."

He sat on at the writing-table, again at a loose end. Then the impulse seized him to send a picture-postcard to Phyllis, just by way of showing her, as he told himself, that he had got over her—just by way, as he did not confess to himself, of getting into touch with her again on the off-chance that he might still succeed. He had the card in front of him, and his hand hovered over it while he tried to think of the right negligent phrases.

The telephone rang and he turned to the instrument. But Mr. Magsley snatched it, saying, " No, you don't. I want something to do just as much as you."

Euan listened, hoping that this might be something of importance. But he heard no more than his chief

making polite noises, ending more articulately with, "*Jawohl, Herr Graf. Also, bis halb-zwölf.*"

Mr. Magsley replaced the receiver and said, in his most pedantic manner, "It would appear that something or other has happened. That was our young friend, Graf Biberbach, whom I thought to be merely a decorative secretary to the entertainment committee. He is very excited. I couldn't get anything from him except that to-day's luncheon is cancelled. He says it would be too *traurig*. How anything could be sadder than last night's banquet I cannot tell you. But he is to be here at half-past eleven to explain it all to us."

"Perhaps it's a revolution," Euan suggested, finally forgetting the postcard to Phyllis. "Some sort of a Nationalist *putsch*?"

"If the creases in the Count's trousers are out of the perpendicular," said Mr. Magsley, "I might incline to that theory. Otherwise I shall work on the assumption of some lesser catastrophe. It is true that his manner seems to be disarranged."

At half-past eleven the Count Biberbach was announced. Euan saw Mr. Magsley's eyes go at once to the trousers of their visitor and felt a dreadful desire to snigger. But the Count flew no signals of distress in his garments. His grey suit was as perfect as any they had ever seen him in, his tie was correctly tied, and the single white flower sat with its habitual air of composure on his left lapel. But his features were not quite so well composed and, as he clicked heels, before shaking hands with Mr. Magsley, the monocle actually fell from among them and clicked against a waistcoat-button. His features were those of a well-bred and well-mannered but embarrassed child.

"Something less," Mr. Magsley murmured, almost inaudibly to Euan, "than a revolution. But something serious, I think."

"I believe, Mr. Magsley," said the Count in English, with an accent so faint that Euan was unreasonably moved to consider it an affectation. "—I believe that my chief is afraid to face you. That is why he has sent

me to be the bearer of evil tidings." He smiled a beautiful smile which did him credit.

"Sit down, Herr Graf," said Mr. Magsley.

"I prefer to stand, sir, if I have your permission. I must blurt it out, and one blurts better on one's feet, doesn't one?" He looked from Mr. Magsley to Euan with the same beautiful smile. "The fact is, sir, that we have just discovered that Vallonia is broke."

"Well," remarked Mr. Magsley, after a pause, "now that you have blurted it out, perhaps you can sit down and we will discuss the matter in all its aspects. I am, as you will perceive, employing the language of diplomacy. Sit down, my dear Biberbach, do."

"Thank you," said Count Biberbach gratefully. With an adroit, almost unnoticeable movement of his legs, that avoided the necessity of pulling up his trousers, he placed himself in an arm-chair. "If it would not be troubling you too much," he said, "I think I should like to ask for a whisky and soda. I have had a trying morning."

"By all means. Euan, the whisky and soda are in that curious chromium-plated sideboard. You have been wanting to do something useful ever since we came to Ringenstadt. Here is your opportunity."

"But, Mr. Cartaret, I could not permit——" The Count was on his feet again in one lithe movement. "After all, gentlemen, we are the hosts in our own country." He went to the sideboard and brought out bottle, siphon, and glasses. "Say when, sir," he adjured Mr. Magsley.

"Stop," said Mr. Magsley, and added, "You relieve me. Do you know? When you said that Vallonia was broke, I feared for a moment that we might have to pay our own hotel-bills."

"Oh, dear me, no, sir. That would have been too bad, wouldn't it? *Zu wohl!*" He drank. "No, sir, all that has happened is that our State Bank has been obliged to close its doors. Too bad, indeed, but not so bad that we must turn our guests into paying guests." He lifted his glass to each of the Englishmen in turn and

appeared to invite commendation of his knowledge of English idioms. They both rewarded him with approving smiles.

"Was that what was happening this morning over in the other corner of the Platz?" Euan asked.

"That was the ruined people going to look at the notice on the closed doors." The Count smiled a little to express his baffled amusement at such behaviour. "It is strange how much consolation ruined people seem to find in the closed doors of a bank." He turned again to Mr. Magsley. "A few unfortunate things have happened, but indeed not that. The most unfortunate thing is that our negotiations must be interrupted for some weeks. The Americans will come to our rescue, of course, sooner or later, but . . ."

"I am glad to hear that," Mr. Magsley observed gravely. Euan, who had been wandering restlessly about the room, stopped and looked at the Count with an anxious expression. It had occurred to him that they might have to stay in Ringenstadt until the Americans came to the rescue of Vallonia.

"In short, sir," the Count continued, "my mission is to ask you when you would like us to put the President's private sleeping-car at your disposal. If you should choose to-night we can arrange to have it attached to the international Paris express at the frontier."

"Herr Graf," said Mr. Magsley, "I perfectly understand. You are going to be engaged for some time in a perfectly private quarrel of your own, and you would prefer to have us out of the way."

"We are going to put a few financiers—how do you say it?—in the jug," the Count answered carelessly. "Not much of a quarrel, but it will take up our time. And, since all currency transactions are suspended, we cannot complete our bargain with your principals on the agreed date. No doubt that matter will be taken up later. But in the meanwhile further discussions on points of detail would have been a mere farce. I am sorry. I am fond of winter sports, and your mountain

railway would have been a great convenience to me. Now there will be one more winter at least in which I shall have to borrow my brother-in-law's car."

" At what time," asked Mr. Magsley, " are we to be at the station? "

" At half-one—I beg your pardon, at twelve-thirty at the President's private siding." The elegant Count rose, clicked his heels and shook hands with Mr. Magsley. He also shook hands with Euan, but in such manner as to draw him towards the door. And when they stood in the open door together, the Count put his hand on Euan's elbow and drew him outside.

" No more tile-factories, etcetera, Mr. Cartaret! " he said. " But we have an idea, my chief and I. The formalities are over for the time. But we should like you and your chief to enjoy one evening in Ringenstadt, if we can arrange it. We undertake, on our honour as gentlemen, to see that you leave in your sleeping-car in time for it to join the Paris express."

Euan rose to the occasion. " On behalf of my chief," he said solemnly, " I accept." And almost clicked his heels and almost bowed.

At twenty-five minutes after midnight, four happy gentlemen arrived on the President's private platform (once the royal platform) at the Ringenstadt Haupt-bahnhof. The station was huge and empty about them, and the jumping arc-lamps made the shadows move fitfully and unexpectedly.

The station-master came to meet them, bareheaded and deferential. " There is not much time," he said anxiously.

" Make time, fool," said the Foreign Minister of Vallonia, poking him in the stomach with an umbrella of generous girth.

"I am always happy with Englishmen," said Count Biberbach to Euan. " Not since I was pilled for the Bullingdon have I been as drunk as I am now. That was a great sorry, you understand? It is a great sorry

now, that you and I must part. But we shall meet again."

"Let me know when you come to London," said Euan hospitably.

Mr. Magsley was sitting on a porter's truck, holding his soft black hat in one hand, and wiping his forehead with the other.

" Yours is the worse misfortune," said the Count, with compassion and pedantic grammatical accuracy. " That little girl with the fair hair—you might have pursued her advantageously. Now it is to me. Where, *mein lieber Freund*, was it that we saw her? "

" Which one? " Euan asked.

" *Ach!* " exclaimed the Count. " Your questions are too difficult for me." He sat on the porter's truck beside Mr. Magsley and let his head sink between his knees. His monocle rattled sharply on the platform.

After that, Euan had for several minutes the impression that, if only he could understand what the Foreign Minister was saying, he would know enough to blow half the Governments of Europe into the clouds. But Baron Wohlreich insisted on talking—it was a symptom well known among his friends—in the dialect used among the Vallonian mountains. Euan could catch no more than the refrain, " *Uns're Freunde, die verfluchten Juden!* " He roused himself from his tranced effort in time to see Mr. Magsley being respectfully carried into the train by the station-master and two minor officials. He followed, though with difficulty, and sat on the top step of their coach.

Count Biberbach rushed after him and seized his hand. " I do not want you to think," he said, " that I did not mind being pilled for the Bullingdon. It was a great sorry for me. No—no—no— Why do I use that wrong word all night? " He tore at his carefully smoothed hair. " Sorrow! Sorrow! That is the word! " He screamed the correction and ran as he screamed, because the train was already moving.

Euan rose unsteadily and got his last glimpse of

Vallonia, which was the Foreign Minister hopping on one leg and waving his generous umbrella after them. Then the conductor seized him by both shoulders and dragged him as respectfully as possible inside.

Some time later, he heard a remote voice, which might have been that of Mr. Magsley, saying: "Thank God, we have sixteen hours between here and Paris." Later still, he had a distinct impression of being respectfully but authoritatively undressed and tucked away in a swaying berth.

II

When Sir Maurice entered Mr. Pratz's room that morning it occurred to him that his partner looked like a tiny, black, polished seed in the husk of a vast hollow fruit. His mouth and his lips were dry, and he did not feel at all sure that he would be able to speak. Mr. Pratz looked up and their eyes met. Sir Maurice wondered whether the sick intensity he could see in the other's gaze was visible in his own.

Then, to his surprise, he heard himself saying without any difficulty: "I suppose there's no doubt about what it means—for us?"

Mr. Pratz moved his head twice from side to side. "None whatever, Maurice," he answered. His eyes left Sir Maurice's and fell to the blank scribbling-pad on the table in front of him. "You're not smoking. Have a cigar?"

"Cigarette, thanks," Sir Maurice muttered. Before he took one from the box which Mr. Pratz produced, he slipped off his heavy overcoat and muffler, and threw them into one of the arm-chairs. "It was cold coming up this morning," he said. Fumbling in his pocket for a match, he stood in front of the fire with legs apart. Mr. Pratz swung round in his swivel-chair to face him, but said nothing.

"Well," said Sir Maurice in a normal voice, looking critically at the ash of his cigarette, "we've never

discussed it, but I assume that we're agreed on what we shall do?" His hand trembled and the ash fell to the floor.

"I have a plan," said Mr. Pratz. "Not for myself. For you. I have the time-table worked out and all the details. I have also the money." He put his hand behind him to a drawer in the table. "Portugal is the place—to begin with. It can just be done—if you start this afternoon."

Sir Maurice shook his head. "Not for me," he declared. "I'm not going to run about the world like Sacheverell. It's no good in the end, even if they don't find you. I don't want to be a down and out in a South American port where I don't know the language. We can at least be sure of not going hungry—not very hungry, that is to say."

Mr. Pratz's melancholy smile showed the genuine but astonishingly porcelain-like teeth. "You don't surprise me, Maurice. That leaves only a few quite simple things to settle."

"That is really all? Those few—simple things? There is nothing we can do?"

It was Mr. Pratz's turn to shake his head. "Those blessed Vallonians have shaken our credit too far. Those blessed Vallonians," he repeated, seeming to find a relish in the mildness of the phrase. "We have only three days to settle with the bank and to pay Glossop the balance of what he wants. Glossop's lawyers, by the way, rang me up half an hour ago to know what arrangements we proposed to make for payment. I suppose they expected us to ask for time. Then Glossop would have known what he could do in the market."

"Can't we arrange something with the bank?"

"They would—well, not laugh at us, there's nothing for *them* to laugh at. . . ." There was almost a tone of satisfaction in Mr. Pratz's voice as he said this. "But I think I would rather give myself up. The question is only whether it is to be made in one move or in two. I should like to resign and show that I do know the game."

"Yes, but you haven't——" Sir Maurice rather gnawed than bit off the end of the sentence.

Mr. Pratz rose swiftly, and in one step was near enough to Sir Maurice to put a hand on his sleeve. "Forgive me," he said softly. "It is bad for you. But it will only do us harm to show fight now. Our best plan is to behave like spaniels—lie on our backs with our feet in the air." He smiled sickly at his partner.

It flashed across Sir Maurice's mind that this was the spirit of the defeated Jew. He, as an Englishman, ought to show more courage, not to know that he was beaten. His fellow-countrymen in the jury-box, on the bench, in the street, would respect him more if he did. But he knew that it was not so. When his misdoings were made known, the one public desire would be to punish him. No effort on his part would do anything but increase the fury of his enemies. And he knew that he no longer had it in him to oppose a bold face to the storm of hatred that was about to engulf him. He must beg for mercy, and little enough he would get! Involuntarily he bowed his head in the pose of a suppliant.

As though distantly, he heard Mr. Pratz saying: "Are your wife and daughter provided for?"

"Not to speak of," he muttered. "Two hundred a year, perhaps, that can't be touched. There was never a time——"

"I feared not," Mr. Pratz continued. "I leave someone behind me too. You don't know it, Maurice, but I have a mistress."

"Good God, Joseph!" cried Sir Maurice, startled out of his preoccupation. "Why didn't I ever know? You don't think I'm a prig, do you?"

Mr. Pratz released again the smile that was so like the flashing of a light. "Why should you have known? She was none of your business and you were none of hers. She has a little house in Muswell Hill. We have known one another for just over twenty years. She is older than I am. I cannot reasonably expect to find her again when . . . we come back. But the point now is—

Maurice, I say this very shyly—the point is whether your wife and daughter may not be her business? I have provided for her—not lavishly, but comfortably, with something to spare. That was when she first came to me—no one can call it in question now. And she will do what I tell her."

Sir Maurice stiffened slightly. Because he had failed in the end, Hilda and Phyllis were to depend on the charity of an old kept woman. He frowned and struggled hard with himself to be reasonable. But Mr. Pratz had already seen what was passing through his mind.

"I only want to help, Maurice," he said. "After all, this is largely my doing."

"No, it's not," Sir Maurice replied stoutly. "You couldn't have foreseen that the Vallonian State Bank would get itself into this mess. Who could? But to think that our money, all the money we need, is over there if only we could get at it!"

"I have never noticed," Mr. Pratz observed dispassionately, "that it makes misfortunes any easier to say that they were not one's own fault. However, we won't philosophize now. I suppose you will be going back to Potham? Or would it be kinder to send someone to tell them—when it is all over?"

Sir Maurice hesitated. "No," he said at last. "You're not going to do that with—your friend, are you?" He saw that he had guessed right. "I won't shirk it either. I shall go down and tell them myself. Then I should like to come back to-morrow and get it over at once."

"To-morrow?"

Sir Maurice nodded decisively.

"Very well. We will do as you wish," An observer as keen as Mr. Pratz himself might have guessed that he found some solace in thus obeying his partner's desire. But he sighed a little. "Come up to-morrow," he continued, "in time to lunch here. I will arrange for Simmons to be here at three o'clock, and he will take us along."

He smiled widely and whitely when he thought what a shock that very eminent solicitor was going to experience. Simmons would not like it. He would arrive with a long face prepared to condole and to suggest arrangements for calling the creditors together. That was all up his street. But to be asked to take two of his most important clients to call on the Director of Public Prosecutions would be something new for him. Well, well, solicitors, like doctors, liked to pretend that nothing could shock them. It would be interesting to see how Simmons received news of the most spectacular fraud since Sacheverell's business.

"That's settled then, Maurice," he said, aloud. "I shall expect you about one." He said no more about Lady Blabey and Phyllis.

Sir Maurice was putting on his overcoat when the telephone rang. "I gave orders that no one was to come in," Mr. Pratz explained. Into the receiver he said, shortly: "What is it?" After a moment he looked up and said: "Bullace is asking for you."

"Have him up," said Sir Maurice. "He'll be company for me on the drive down. Then he can come straight back."

When Bullace entered the room, he wore an expression in his eyes that was at once bold and frightened. He entered, however, with his usual negligent, big-framed ease.

"Good morning, sir," he said to Mr. Pratz and to Sir Maurice: "Good morning, sir. Am I in the way?"

"Not at all, Bullace," smiled Mr. Pratz. "Our business is finished."

"I wondered whether you mightn't have some more news about Vallonia. The *Daily Informer* has been after me this morning. I thought if I could get them to print something reassuring, it might be useful."

"Did they want to know where we were?" Sir Maurice asked.

"I told them that I didn't know, but that I might be ble to get into touch with you in the course of the day."

"What else did you tell them?" Mr. Pratz enquired.

"Nothing," said Bullace quickly. "I hadn't anything to tell." He smiled disarmingly, but the faint shadow of fright in his eyes grew a little deeper. "Of course, I warned them in a casual way not to make mountains out of molehills."

Mr. Pratz looked at his partner amusedly.

"Quite right, George," said Sir Maurice. "That does no harm. By the way, would you like to drive me down to Potham this morning? I'll give you lunch and send you back afterwards." He turned to Mr. Pratz and explained. "There may be reporters watching my car outside. I don't want to be pestered."

"My car's in the garage," Bullace said eagerly. "If I ring up, they'll send a man round with it in twenty minutes."

"Better have a taxi at the side door," Mr. Pratz suggested. "Then you can drive to the garage together." He rang for his secretary and gave him instructions. "And when you've done that, Hoskins," he added, "come back. I daresay Sir Maurice would like a drink before he goes."

The secretary went out and Bullace said, with a little anxiety: "If you will tell me what to say to the *Daily Informer*, I can let them have it from here."

"We won't say anything just now," Mr. Pratz replied.

"But I think it would do good, you know," Bullace insisted.

"You have been very kind, Bullace," said Mr. Pratz, "and very useful when we have asked you to convey something to the *Daily Informer*. But you must allow us to judge whether there is anything to be conveyed." These words were dryly enunciated, but they were accompanied by a charming smile.

"I'm sorry," Bullace mumbled, and Sir Maurice looked a little awkard. There was silence until Hoskins returned, and, crossing the room as smoothly as though he had gone on castors, unlocked the beautiful, expensive corner-cupboard. Then he turned with a well-trained look of enquiry.

"Whisky for me," said Sir Maurice. "A stiff one." Bullace too said that he would have whisky. Mr. Pratz asked for the dry sherry.

Hoskins said something that no one could hear except Mr. Pratz, who exclaimed, "Oh, yes! Schuylers have sent us a bottle of a special brandy to try. They can let us have six and a half dozen if we like it. Shall we try it now?"

"Whisky for me," Sir Maurice repeated.

"I'll have the sherry," said Mr. Pratz.

Bullace said nothing and got whisky.

The secretary was leaving the room when Sir Maurice called after him, "I say, Hoskins, you might get me twenty pounds, will you?"

"Yes, Sir Maurice. As usual? Three fives and five ones?"

"That will do very nicely." The secretary went out.

"What do you want with twenty pounds, Maurice?" Mr. Pratz asked, almost mischievoulsy.

Sir Maurice seemed to be taken aback. "Why, I hardly know," he confessed. "I always draw some pocket-money here when I come up from the country. It's become a sort of habit." Bullace saw his face go suddenly strained and grey.

"Give it to Phyllis," said Mr. Pratz lightly.

The secretary returned with a little envelope. "The taxi is at the side door, sir," he said.

"Don't keep it there," Mr. Pratz warned. "It might draw attention. I'll send your car away, Maurice, when you've gone. It had better stay in London till this afternoon. Everything is very quiet so far, but, from what Bullace tells us, I dare say our movements are being watched. There's nothing more for us to settle, is there? I shall see you here at about one to-morrow. What shall I order for lunch?"

"I'll leave that to you," Sir Maurice replied, rather brusquely. He went out with Bullace.

Mr. Pratz unlocked one of the drawers in his table, took out several fat packets of notes, and left behind a

book of railway tickets. He had been at particular pains to see that the money could not be easily traced, and Sally might as well have it. He remembered that he was to send Sir Maurice's car away, and went into Hoskins's room to give the order. The secretary was in the outer office, leaning on the chief cashier's desk, in whispered conversation with him. There was not the usual subdued hum of quiet unhurried industry in the room. The rhythm had become subtly irregular and restless. But the typists resumed their tasks when they saw Mr. Pratz. He gave his instructions to a dutiful Hoskins and passed on.

A few moments later he, too, entered a taxi at the side door, giving the driver an address in Muswell Hill.

III

As soon as Sir Maurice had seen Bullace's car standing in the garage, he regretted his decision not to return to Potham in his own, reporters or no reporters. It looked a fierce, uncomfortable thing, with hood and wind-screens most inadequate for a cold, rainy day. But he allowed himself to be packed into it, and sat there listlessly while Bullace argued with the garage-man about the necessity of fresh oil. He felt vexed when Bullace climbed in beside him, and he had to huddle into the corner so that his coat should not fall over the gear-lever. But he hardly noticed the starting of the engine, or the gingerly crawl that followed through the mews, or, indeed, any of the streets of London.

In Epping Forest, leafless, wet, and deserted, he found spirit enough to light a cigarette. Bullace glanced slightly towards him at this sign of life and appeared to be about to say something. But Sir Maurice crouched lower in his seat and turned further away. He had, so far, been able to avoid thinking and he did not want to talk. His mind sank into a vast and even slackness. There was nothing he need think about for the time,

nothing he could do, nothing to be done, either by him or by Joseph. It was all over, bar the shouting, and, in this little moving world, cold and draughty though it might be, no one could shout at him yet. Then, after an unmeasured interval, he opened his eyes and recognised the near approaches to his home.

Another twenty minutes—another fifteen—another ten. . . . The moment was appreciably closer when he would have to tell Hilda that he was going away from her, and why. For the first time he looked curiously at Bullace and wondered how much he knew. He wondered also how Bullace would behave when he knew all that there was to know. At any rate, there would have to be lunch first, since he could not say what he had to say to Hilda . . . and to Phyllis . . . with an outsider in the house. Bullace could be packed off without rudeness between three and four. Hilda, no doubt, would be lying down then. It would not be until after tea. . . . Suddenly he realised that the car had stopped in front of Potham Hall. There was a thin, blowing rain, but the movement of the clouds suggested that presently the sky would be clear.

Phyllis, who had heard the brakes, sauntered round from the stables and entered his field of sight as a newly poignant thought enters a mind numbed with pain. "Roughing it, aren't you, Daddy?" she called. "I hope you haven't caught a chill. Mother's got one. She's been a perfect misery all the morning."

Sir Maurice shivered uncontrollably, and pushed at the door which did not yield. "Here," she said, wrenching it open. "Look out!" He tumbled awkwardly from the car. He had been huddled so long in one position that his legs ached and were clumsy. He felt that he was very ill, that he ought to go to bed, and that no one could hurt him if he were ill in bed.

"I don't know why you've come back on a day like this," Phyllis went on petulantly. "It wasn't fit for riding this morning. I thought of coming up myself, but Mother won't let me. She says she's not well enough to

be left alone. She's in the mood of thinking that we all treat her badly."

Sir Maurice shivered again. "Come on," he said. "I want a drink, and so does George."

As they went indoors, Mr. Harper came out of his room to meet them. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "there's been a man here this morning asking for you."

"Go on, you two, and get out something to drink," Sir Maurice ordered. He herded Mr. Harper before him into the work-room and asked, "Was it a reporter? I don't want to see any reporters."

"Exactly, sir. I sent him away, but he went into the garden and began looking in at the windows."

"What did you do then?"

"I got an umbrella, sir——"

"You got an umbrella?" Sir Maurice's incredulous admiration for Mr. Harper returned, to the exclusion of every other feeling.

"Yes, sir, it was raining. I went on tiptoe behind him and touched him on the shoulder and made him jump. Then I said, 'My good man, please don't keep me out in the rain to see you off the premises.' That made him ashamed of himself and he went away."

"Thank you, Harper," said Sir Maurice. "You handled the matter with great discretion."

"Thank *you*, sir," said Mr. Harper.

"Not at all. By the way, Harper——"

"Yes, sir?"

"He hasn't gone away. I can see him hanging about in the rose-garden."

"Oh dear, oh dear," muttered Mr. Harper distractedly, "wherever did I put that umbrella?"

Sir Maurice glanced round the little work-room with its clean severe office furniture. His own table was kept as sacredly clear as ever of the papers which were piled on Mr. Harper's. He looked idly at the top sheet of the pile. The secretary was engaged on his monthly masterpiece, the statement of his employer's household and personal expenditure. There it all was, set out in the

luxury of black and red, the gardeners' wages and the feed for Phyllis's horses, the bills from the garage and the saddler, a bill for two frocks and a hat from Elspeth et Cie. . . . When the statement was ready, Sir Maurice would scrutinise it, paining Mr. Harper a little, perhaps, by his readiness to take its accuracy for granted. When he could remember, and had the time, he would question an item here and there, so as to allow a beaming Mr. Harper to prove his invariable rightness. But this amiable ceremony would not take place again. The admirable secretary was forward with his work. The statement was not due for presentation until the end of the week. Sir Maurice smiled crookedly as he wondered what Mr. Harper would do with it then. He shrugged his shoulders and went into the dining-room, where Bullace was teaching Phyllis how to mix a very special cocktail.

At lunch, he found himself studying Bullace's rather dark face with the small black moustache. He wondered whether this useful companion had noticed his depression and, reading it in the light of the rumours that were already afloat, had put two and two together. If so, what might not happen? What if the policeman's hand should fall on his shoulder before he could in due form give himself up? It seemed to him now to be of immense importance that this last scene should at any rate be carried out with dignity.

Bullace was leaning back with a wine-glass in his long fingers. Sir Maurice observed, not for the first time, that, for a man who did his own running repairs, and adopted in general the pose of the hearty and careless male, he kept his hands in uncommonly good order.

"My dear Phyllis," he was saying, "I can get you tickets for it whenever you like. The manager's a friend of mine."

No doubt. Small services, small courtesies, pleasant manners, and agreement and agreement and agreement. That was why George Bullace was the last guest Maurice Blabey would entertain at his own table. And where were Maurice Blabey's other friends? There was only

Joseph, and Joseph was in the same boat, not able to send help from the shore. It seemed to him that of late years he had slipped into the company of juniors, who would agree with him and entertain him and oblige him, about whom he need not trouble himself much, with whom he need not argue. He sighed, and fancied that Bullace was watching him secretly.

"I will not," he said, rousing himself, "—I will not admit that I have reached the age when a man falls asleep after lunch. I must go out for a walk. Phyllis, my love, go and see how your mother is, will you?" Then he rose and said to George, "I'm going to change. Phyllis will see you off the premises."

For a moment he almost questioned whether this easy dismissal would be accepted as easily as in the past. But Bullace was on his feet in a moment, saying: "By Jove, sir, it's late! I ought to have been away before now." Which was, of course, just what he should have said.

When Sir Maurice came down again in loose tweeds, Phyllis was standing outside the open door waving Bullace down the drive. She turned to her father and said: "Mother's still complaining. She doesn't want to be disturbed before tea. But you needn't worry, there's nothing the matter with her really."

"I'll see her after tea," he answered. "Are you going to ride?"

"There's an hour before dark." She went in, waving to him too. He set off to tramp the wet lanes.

It had grown dark before he knew how far he had gone, or how little fit he was to walk so far. He had been unable to keep his mind still or to keep it on one track for more than a few moments at a time. Once he had found himself leaning on a gate, holding a long imaginary conversation with Mr. Pratz, but ignorant why he had stopped there or what the beginning of the conversation had been. "No, Joseph," he was saying, "there's hope in bankruptcy, but none in this." It struck him now as an effective phrase.

He broke abruptly through the dialogue and said aloud: " This won't do—I must get home." But he felt dizzy and a little sick, and it was painful to have to put one foot in front of another. Then his mind was saying with urgent persuasiveness: " You see, Bullinger, for your own sake you *must* help us through."

All thought left him as he entered the village: he could do no more than reckon again and again the distance that lay between him and home. He wanted a drink and a hot bath, but he could not get to them. He steadied himself for a minute by a scaffold-pole outside one of the houses that he was rebuilding. Then he struggled on to Mr. Tillyard's golden-lit door.

It so happened that Mr. Tillyard was laying down the law to the customers in the taproom. " You leave those things to them that knows something about 'em," he said commandingly. " Where 'ud you all be, I'd like to know, if there weren't rich gentlemen to spend their money in the village? Ben Brooks 'd be selling his eggs to the higgler, I suppose, at three and six a dozen, like he gets from the Hall." A general laugh acknowledged this to be a close hit.

Sir Maurice, leaning against the wall in the darkness of the passage, tried to shout " Tillyard! " but found himself unable to utter even a whisper. It was only the clattering fall of his stick which drew the landlord's attention to his presence.

" 'Ere, 'oo's that? " cried Mr. Tillyard, in a voice loud enough to frighten anyone who had no business to be there.

Sir Maurice had an odd feeling that the house was falling to pieces about him. He put his hand on the wall and cursed the slipperiness of the pitch-pine that gave him no grip. He was about to collapse when Tillyard, with a rough hand on his shoulder, dragged him upright.

" What's all this? " Tillyard wanted to know, and then in the same breath: " Well, dear me, come into the parlour, sir. I thought it was one of them tramps,

always coming into other people's houses and taking their goods."

As he uttered the last words, he lowered Sir Maurice, with more deftness than might have been expected from his bulk, on to the couch in the parlour. "Come over queer like, sir, I expect," he said sympathetically. "Now if I was you, sir, I'd have just a drop of rum hot."

"Anything you like, Tillyard," said Sir Maurice in a faint voice.

"That 'd be the best thing, sir." And in an incredibly short time Tillyard returned with the hot rum, steaming, in a glass that looked no more than a thimble in his thick fingers. The first sip revived Sir Maurice, but he felt sick and cold and the sweat was clammy on his forehead. He found that his hand was trembling when he tried to put the glass down on the table.

"Just a little dizziness," he murmured. "Something disagreed with me, probably. Then I walked too far."

"Look a bad colour, you do," Mr. Tillyard observed. "Just drink that down, sir, and I'll send up to the Hall for your car."

But Sir Maurice was having none of that. He did not want Phyllis to put him to bed and treat him like an invalid: hours were growing precious now. He started up at once and finished his rum on his feet, though he did not feel at all sure of his knees. When he had finished, in spite of Mr. Tillyard's protests, he insisted on going.

"Good-bye, Tillyard," he said at the door, "and thank you for all your kindness."

"Why, it wasn't nothing to talk about, sir," exclaimed the inn-keeper, a little surprised.

"And—Tillyard? Have you got a bill outstanding against me?"

"I always sends that to Mr. Harper, sir," said Mr. Tillyard, still more surprised. "It's just ready to go now."

"I'll pay it, then," said Sir Maurice, with an attempt at a smile. "That will save trouble, won't it?"

"Very good, sir." Mr. Tillyard, though evidently mystified, brought him two or three sheets torn from an exercise-book on which large characters had been laboriously traced.

Sir Maurice looked only at the total. "Eleven pounds fourteen something," he muttered, feeling for the money he had got from the office that morning. "Here's twelve pounds, Tillyard. Stand a round in the tap for me out of the change."

Without waiting for thanks or further remonstrance, he plunged into the black village street. Apparently his colour was not so bad when he reached the Hall. At any rate, Phyllis seemed not to notice it.

"Mother's suffering," she said, with a grimace, "and isn't to be disturbed."

"I want to see her, though. Go and ask her whether I shall come now or after dinner."

"I shouldn't," she warned him. "She's in an awful mood."

"Never mind. Go along, please, Phyllis."

She raised her fine eyebrows but obeyed. Presently she came back and said: "She can't talk to anyone until the morning."

He made a forcible noise under his breath and began to climb the stairs more rapidly than his strength would allow. At the top he had to pause until his heart grew quieter. Then he knocked at Lady Blabey's door and, hearing no answer, went softly in.

There was no light in the room save from the fire, but that was large and bright enough. Sir Maurice saw on the bedside table a half-empty cup of chicken-broth and several small bottles of tabloids. In the bed lay his wife under a tumbled heap of linen sheets and blankets and a great eiderdown. For a moment the wide spaces of the room, with its thick carpet and curtains and the hardly moving shadows, seemed very peaceful to him.

Then, without stirring, his wife said in her patiently hostile voice: "What do you want, Maurice? Didn't Phyllis give you my message?"

" I want to talk to you," he replied.

" I can't talk now," she said, pressing her face down into the pillow as though she had dismissed him.

" I'm afraid you must."

With a sudden movement she sat up and faced him. He noticed, unexpectedly but dispassionately, that she looked very old, much older than he did, though she was in fact several years younger. Her hair, arranged for the sick bed, was poor and without any light in it. The bed-jacket of crumpled mauve silk was pulled round thin shoulders and left exposed a stringy, yellowish neck.

While he was observing all this, he was silent, but she did not expect him to speak. . She said: " You have no consideration at all, Maurice. You only make my head worse by standing there. I suppose I can't tell you to go away: this is your house and you can do what you like in it. But I won't listen." She threw herself down again and pulled the clothes up almost to her eyes.

" I'm sorry, Hilda," he said patiently, " but this is something very important." Then he saw, with a sort of numbing astonishment, that she was in fact not listening. She was holding her thumbs tightly pressed to her ears. He gasped and the blood rushed into his face. Where he had been pale and cold, he was red and hot. He found that he had rushed at his wife and had pulled her hands away from her head. He knew that he had done this because her wrists were so thin and icy in his burning hands.

A low wailing sound broke from her lips, but there was no sign of fear in her eyes. There was rather, he told himself, a look of dull, hostile pleasure. That look frightened him. He released her wrists and let his hands fall to his sides. He choked and uttered hoarsely: " Hilda, it's all up! I've got to go to prison! "

The wail rose a tone higher and grew louder, and the eyes, the pale eyes with their faintly coloured whites, became wide and round. But, most horribly, the expression in them did not change. He endured her

gaze for a moment, and then he was outside in the corridor and fighting for breath.

There remained with him a vision of his wife slowly and contentedly lying down again as he fled from her hatred.

He made a movement towards the stairs, but he could not let Phyllis see him like this. He stumbled instead to his own room, where a maid was laying out his clothes.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she murmured, like a well-trained maid, though she had every right to be there.

"Leave those things, they're all right," he ordered incoherently. And, as she was leaving the room, "Tell Raynes to bring me a whisky and soda."

He sipped his second whisky from time to time as he changed, lingering and savouring the luxurious half-idleness of this hour before dinner which he was never to enjoy again. He went slowly down and drank a cocktail with Phyllis in front of the great fire in the hall. To-morrow seemed remote and meaningless. But when the conversation fell for a moment he remembered Hilda's eyes and was seized by a shudder so strong that his daughter looked at him anxiously.

"You *have* caught a chill," she said in an accusing voice.

"No, I haven't," he answered. "It was someone walking over my grave."

After dinner he told her. "Phyllis," he said, "something very bad has happened." Then he explained and watched her expression of alarm deepen into a graver shadow. After the one important word had been pronounced, he ceased to look at her but stared down at the nutshells on his plate.

She rose and came, without haste, to his side. Even with her father she was as reticent in the bestowal of caresses as more than one demanding young man had found her. She only put her hand on his that lay on the table.

"That," she murmured, as if to herself, "was what George meant." But, she thought in the recesses of her

mind, she had known before that: it seemed as though she had faced the shock of utter ruin long ago and had got over the worst of it.

"George?"

"He was trying to warn me about something this morning. It makes sense now. Daddy—shall I marry George?"

She put her arm round his shoulders, a sign that she meant this as a practical contribution to his problem. It did not come entirely as a surprise to him, but he could not answer at once. She went on: "I want to know—about Mother."

"Your mother," he replied, "will have enough to live on—in something not much better than poverty. It won't be very pleasant for you to have to live with her. But are you sure that—now——?"

"Yes," she said expressionlessly, "George will still want to marry me. I know." Her tone was quite impartial. It did not suggest that her faith in George included any belief in his chivalry.

"I can't advise you, dear," he said helplessly. Phyllis's lips set a little and she nodded almost imperceptibly. There was a long silence.

At the end of it, she said: "May I come with you—to-morrow?"

He shook his head. "I'm lunching with Joseph and then we are—going on together. Simmons will come down and talk to your mother. I think he will do that for me."

She nodded, with tight lips. "I shall come up with you as far as the City. Then I shall go to Babs."

"Leaving your mother?" She nodded again. "You are very hard to her. Why not to me?"

The tight lips trembled. They framed some words but did not utter them. Phyllis was trying to say to her father, "I love you." After a moment's effort, she murmured instead: "Does she know?"

"I think she does." He uttered a wincing little laugh. "I don't know whether she understands what it means to her."

"Come into the drawing-room, Daddy. We'll have coffee there. I think there's some of that old Kümmel left. You'd like it, wouldn't you?"

For a time in the drawing-room they talked about indifferent things that had happened long before. At last Sir Maurice said in a calm, cheerful voice: "Well, my love, it's time we were in bed." Then Phyllis slowly, awkwardly, knelt beside him, pressed her face into his knee, encircled his legs with her arms.

IV

"Damn!" cried Euan, as the boat train began to slide out of the Gare du Nord. "We haven't got any papers." He rushed to the corridor and could be heard shouting. Presently he returned with two copies of the Continental edition of the *Daily Informer*.

"Best I could get," he explained. "I don't suppose there's anything in it." He gave one copy to Mr. Magsley, put his own on the seat beside him and began to fumble for a cigarette.

"So long," said Mr. Magsley, "as there is no reference to the manner of our leaving Ringenstadt, I shan't mind there being nothing else." He flattened the paper out in front of him and looked at it without interest. Then he whistled. "Listen, Euan," he said, "don't look at that paper for a moment. I'm afraid some of our friends are in trouble."

"What?" asked Euan, mechanically taking up the paper.

"No, put it down. There is some unpleasant news in it. Sir Maurice Blabey is a friend of yours, isn't he? And—forgive me, Euan, if this is tactless—you rather like his daughter, don't you?"

Euan looked up, startled and awake. "I know them both well," he said. "What is it?"

"Sir Maurice," Mr. Magsley said gravely, "has crashed."

"Crashed?"

"He and Pratz gave themselves up to the police yesterday."

"Gave themselves up?" asked Euan, as yet incapable of anything but an echo. He had a dizzying impression of a world like a kaleidoscope and all the pieces sliding out of one pattern but not settled into another. He glanced helplessly to one side and saw the country moving smoothly past. A notice-board shouted BYRRH and was gone.

"I am afraid that it looks like a bad business," Mr. Magsley continued in the same serious tone. "As I read this, they have made what amounts to a confession. They've been dealing in forged Vallonian stocks to the tune of a million or so. They seem to have pledged the certificates of the preliminary issue twice over—once in England and once on the Continent."

"I say," Euan cried, his mind growing a little less numb, "do you mean that they're in prison?"

"Presumably. They come up before the police court to-day. I wonder whether it will affect us?"

"It means no amalgamation," said Euan, fighting for something to say.

"That, of course. But I wonder how much money my poor, misguided friend, that eminent business-man, Arthur Bullinger, has managed to drop? We shall never know. This will be a wonderful excuse for cutting down our appropriation in any event. Have you any idea how Lady Blabey and the girl will be left?"

Euan shook his head. "I don't know anything about their affairs," he said shortly.

Mr. Magsley made a mental note of the tone. "I imagine," he mused aloud, "that Sir Maurice handled a great deal of money but kept very little of it."

"I dare say," Euan grunted. Then, uncomfortably, trying not to appear rude, he picked up his *Daily Informer* and pretended to study it.

He could not help seeing some of the profusion of headlines. "Taxi to Brixton" was one of them. He

felt almost physically sick, much too sick to talk to his companion. Sir Maurice, whom he had really liked, was a criminal, and would have to suffer the torturing penalty of his crime. Yet he was not a criminal, if the word had meaning. He was the man who had taken Euan round the rose-garden, explaining what he was going to do next year, who had chatted with Mr. Tillyard, who had wanted to build a pavilion for the cricket club. He was the man who had once talked about electricity to a small boy, as one grown-up to another.

Euan moved uneasily in his seat, but kept the paper well in front of his face. Mr. Magsley, on the other side of that barrier, began to make a few pencilled calculations. His cynicism about the heaven-born had not saved him from investing on their advice.

Not until they were at luncheon together did Euan speak again. He stared for some moments as though about to say something, and then it came out abruptly.

"What will happen to them?" he asked.

"Seven years, I suppose." Mr. Magsley wiped his long moustache and blinked his blue eyes rather unhappily. "They will get no mercy. They weren't really heaven-born, do you see? They've failed, as it were, in the qualifying examination and that's a dreadful failure. Let us put them away, the heaven-born will think, and forget that we ever had anything to do with them."

"They weren't ordinary swindlers," Euan contended, as though he were for the defence and Mr. Magsley for the prosecution. "They never meant to make off with the money."

"My dear boy," said Mr. Magsley, "when we get back you must design an entirely new set of heaven-born. And it wouldn't be such a bad idea if you designed a new type of company-promoter, too." Mentally he asked: "Why doesn't he say what he wants to say?"

But Euan murmured only: "We shan't get that dynamo now."

"That will not afflict me much. Your passion for apparatus is dreadful, Euan. You ought to be reduced to old cigar-boxes and odd bits of tin. That would stimulate the inventive faculty."

Euan thereupon harangued his chief on the scandalous way in which they were starved of apparatus. He instanced the marvellous laboratories he had seen in Germany, and told, not for the first time, the story of how, in his presence, the head of the research staff at Petersdorf had told the apologetic chairman of the concern to take that *verdammte* installation away and replace it by something fit for a scientist to use.

"You can call Blabey a criminal if you like," he ended, in indignation, "but he had some sense about things like that."

"I am trying to remember all you say," Mr. Magsley observed meekly, when Euan paused to drink his liqueur. "But I am afraid I shall have to remember it rather a long time. Don't imagine that I am going to repeat it all to the heaven-born while they are still licking the wounds in their bank-balances."

Euan laughed, finished his liqueur, and felt momentarily better. But the wait to go on board the boat depressed him again, and soon as possible he dragged his docile companion into the smoking-room.

While they sat there looking for a waiter, Euan heard a voice at the table behind him, saying: "No, it hasn't hit *me*. But isn't it bad enough to have to cut my holiday short like this? I hadn't any choice, I can tell you. There'll be merry hell in the City to-day and to-morrow."

There was an indistinct murmur of sympathy from the speaker's friend, and the voice went on: "I know if I hadn't smelt a rat and cleared out six weeks ago, my wife and daughter would be begging in the streets—I hope his will do worse."

Euan jumped and Mr. Magsley laid a soothing hand on his arm.

The outraged gentleman continued, but more complacently: "Instinct, I suppose. I've had it before.

I've always followed Blabey up to now and I've made a packet out of some of those companies. I used to know Pratz and he let me into the underwriting once or twice. I can't imagine why they haven't committed suicide. That's what I should have done in their place."

"Come on," Euan muttered angrily. "Come out of this. I want to talk to you." He strode towards the companion-way, snorting, as he passed, at the high-minded speculator whose red face and bulging eyes showed no consciousness of his disapproval.

Mr. Magsley followed with unabated docility, but suggested when they reached the deck that it would do them no harm to find a sheltered place. The boat was putting out into a darkening November afternoon and spray was already blowing. Euan was momentarily dazed by the change from the lighted saloon, by the cold air and by the pressure of his indignation. It was his turn to be docile, and he suffered himself to be led. But, even as he followed, he tried to begin talking.

Mr. Magsley snatched at his sleeve and prevented collisions with several reeling passengers. "Be quiet," he said firmly—and then, when at last they were safe behind the deck-house: "Now, Euan . . ."

"It's awfully difficult," said Euan, suddenly seized by a boyish mumble, "and I don't want to bore you, but I must ask someone. You do understand that, don't you, sir? I don't know what to do."

"I don't suppose I shall know either," Mr. Magsley said cheerfully. "But I don't suppose that that is what you want. Go on, when you are ready."

"You must know something about it, because you said—— The point is that Phyllis Blabey and I were more or less engaged in the summer."

"It was broken off? Whose doing was that?"

"Hers. I didn't want to break it off."

They were out at sea now and deliberate conversation was becoming difficult. The wind tore Mr. Magsley's judicial "Well?" from his lips and tossed it into the darkness astern. The boat began to roll unpleasantly.

Euan tried to say something and perceived that he was not heard. He abandoned subtleties and shouted at the top of his voice: " I don't know what to do! "

Mr. Magsley steadied himself with a suddenly clutching hand and yelled in the same tones: " It depends on what you want to do."

" You see," Euan began, and then he groaned, " Oh, this is absurd."

" Go on," bawled Mr. Magsley encouragingly. " If I can't hear you, no one else can."

The wind blew still louder, but between gusts Euan managed to get out: " If I went to her now—and asked her again—what would she—think? Would you think —it was—just pity? Or might she—marry me—without wanting to? "

Mr. Magsley felt himself entitled to pass a hand over his forehead before attempting to reply. He was not sure that counsel on so delicate a matter was within his competence anyway. On a rolling ship in half a gale, it seemed to be altogether impossible.

He was, however, respited, for Euan suddenly fell against him, gasping: " I'm afraid—I'm afraid I'm going to be ill."

This was something that Mr. Magsley knew how to deal with. He supported the unfortunate young man along the deck until they met a steward who found them an empty cabin. There, with a basin and some brandy, he sympathetically attended to Euan's immediate woes.

The boat was within twenty minutes of land before Euan was in a condition to talk again. But having made the beginning, he was determined to talk, and he did. He sat up on the couch, with his fair hair damp on his forehead, and, in the manner of men in his condition, he kept on saying what he wanted to say over and over again. " Would it be fair to her? " he asked, and then: " She might do anything now in desperation, mightn't she? " And, after a pause and another sip of brandy: " How could I tell what she really wanted? Or she

might think I was being magnanimous and condescending to her."

Mr. Magsley sat with hands hanging between his long legs, and occasionally nodded gravely or stroked his moustache to indicate suspension of judgement. He understood that he was not expected to do more than murmur in the longer intervals between questions: "You must think that over very carefully," or "There is a good deal in what you say." By the time when they were alongside the quay, he was beginning to congratulate himself on wise counsel in delicate matters, so well satisfied did Euan seem to be.

Euan was, in fact, not only more cheerful but hungry as well. He bought chocolate to eat on the train, and, when he parted from Mr. Magsley at Victoria, he said hurriedly: "I shall write her a sympathetic letter and ask whether I can see her soon." Then, as though ashamed of having said so much, he jumped into his taxi and drove off.

All the way to his rooms he felt a glow of pleasure in having taken so sensible and promising a decision. He began to rehearse in his mind how he would talk to Phyllis when he saw her, how his tone should be, just what it would have been if, say, her father had died suddenly . . . he would make it all seem perfectly natural. . . . It annoyed him to find that the Telluses were out, for he had wanted Harry's views on the catastrophe.

He washed and changed, and there remained now only to write to Phyllis before he set out to meet Mona at the Bran Pie.

"My dear Phyllis," he began, "—you know how terribly distressed I am. . . ." That somehow did not seem quite right, and he threw the sheet on one side and made a fresh start. "I can't tell you how much I feel for you." That looked incredibly silly when it was solemnly written down in black and white, and it followed the first attempt. "I want to help you if there is anything I can do." Worse! Stupid, clumsy,

the very thing to make a proud girl suspect him of chivalrously stooping to her. Then he discovered that there was no more note-paper. He glared helplessly round his sitting-room. The furniture, neither of his own choice nor familiar from childhood, reminded him that he was no longer at home and that he had no sister to blame when he ran short of what he wanted. The stolid clock on the mantelpiece, with its marble pillars, reminded him that he had only just time to keep his appointment with Mona at the Bran Pie. After all, this letter had better not be written in a hurry.

When he reached the club, he frowned to find Mona drinking a cocktail which Mr. Damara had ordered for her. But she was so glad to see him that she almost kissed him under the lights of the dance-room, and in the presence of Mr. Damara and two waiters. He on his side was so glad to see her that at first he forgot to be rude to her temporary host. He soon remedied the omission, and the thin, miserable, red-eyed old man took himself away after a high-pitched compliment or two.

"Tell me all about it, darling," said Mona when they were alone. "Such extraordinary things have been happening here! Do you know that Bertie Farwig's barred again? And do you know that Mr. Dykes is going to keep me on after my month's trial and give me four pounds a week—the same that I got at Elspeth's? The queerest people come in, and I have to be polite——"

"Have you heard anything of this business of Blabey's?" Euan asked.

Mona looked at him doubtfully, took an evening paper from the seat beside her, and hesitated. "This is the latest news," she said at last, putting it in front of him.

The *Evening Blazon* was obviously proud in the possession of a good story. Someone had been very clever or very lucky, and there was a smugness about the headlines which suggested that the *Blazon* had the news to itself. Let the other papers dish up again what had

been served already in the morning. The *Blazon* had got hold of something altogether new and unexpected and exceedingly romantic. It rejoiced in being able to tell its readers, before anyone else could tell them, that Major George Bullace had given notice at the Bloomsbury Register Office of his intention to marry Miss Phyllis Helen Blabey at the beginning of the following week.

What was more, one of the *Blazon's* enterprising reporters had induced Major Bullace to talk. "There has been an understanding between us for a long time," said Major Bullace to the representative of the *Evening Blazon*. "There is nothing for me to say, except that I am glad to have the opportunity of standing by my fiancée in her hour of trial. Yes, I am an old friend of the family." They had got hold of a photograph of Phyllis, the same of which she had given Euan a copy. It showed her leaning against the door of the stables at Potham. There was also a photograph of the gallant Major Bullace and another of a crowd gaping at the windows of the General Finance Corporation.

Mona watched Euan sideways while he tried to take in all the information. For a moment he was silent. Then he said drily: "Noble fellow, Bullace, isn't he? He needn't have talked about it, I should have thought. Are you ready for another cocktail?"

She said that she was, and made no remark when he put the paper aside and began to tell her about his experiences in Vallonia. She laughed joyously when he described his last glimpse of the Foreign Minister of Vallonia standing on one leg and waving an umbrella. She was brisk and vivacious in answering him when an answer was necessary, but, so long as he would go on talking, she let him talk. She noticed throughout the evening, with a little pang, that he was drinking more than was usual with him.

For the first half-hour after dinner he insisted on leading her out for every dance. He danced with enormous energy and agility, and when there was a collision

he spoke truculently to the victims. Then, she thought, he seemed to grow tired, and he wanted to sit and talk.

"Do you remember," he asked her, "that first night we met?" She nodded with a little smile. "Do I dance any better now?" She nodded again. "It isn't so long ago," he pursued with a vague expression in his eyes. "Did you ever think then that we were going to see so much of one another?" She shook her head, still smiling. He put out his hand under the table, groping for hers. She gave it to him and felt two pangs, one because he looked so unhappy, one because of the reason.

At eleven o'clock he said with an obvious effort: "Will you have another drink if I order sandwiches?"

She replied: "You've been travelling all day and you can hardly keep your eyes open. I think I ought to take you home instead of your taking me."

He grinned wearily and agreed that they should go. He slouched over Bray's counter so that the Sergeant wondered whether he would need help in getting downstairs.

On the other side of the landing, Mona was absently agreeing to Mrs. Badger's proposition that Major Bullace had always been a real gentleman, and that now he had proved it. "Unless, of course," Mrs. Badger added as an afterthought, "she has a lot o money in her own name. In that case, miss, it wouldn't be reasonable to call him a gentleman, would it? I shouldn't marry a gaolbird's daughter for her money, no matter how much of it there might be."

In the taxi Mona suddenly but gently drew Euan's head on to her breast and he let it stay there. She thought how different this was from any of the many evenings they had spent together recently. There had never been any physical tokens of affection between them save the kiss she always offered, and he always took on her doorstep. Now the passive body lying against her, the hand thrown across her lap, made her heart ache for some way of showing that she was fond

of him. Without knowing what she did, she put her mouth to his hair. He seemed to feel the caress and made a little movement to be closer to her.

She almost thought that he was asleep, but he must have been conscious of the ground they were covering, for he started up as the cab turned into Gilderoy Street.

"You darling," he said, and by the light of the street lamp outside her door she caught the expression in his eyes.

He escorted her to the door, but instead of accepting the usual good-night kiss, put his hands on her waist, and stood looking at her for some moments. She waited silently for him to speak.

"Mona," he said hesitatingly, "what have you been doing with yourself in the evenings while I've been away?"

"Oh, I've been very quiet," she answered lightly. "I went to the pictures with Mrs. Battcock twice. Most nights I dined with Huffy and Harry. One night Huffy and I overhauled all your clothes. There wasn't much to do to them. Your sister must have looked after you very well."

His voice was a little unsteady as he said, "Are you free for dinner to-morrow night?"

"Of course I am, if you want me, Euan. The Bran Pie at half-past seven?"

"Good. The Bran Pie at half-past seven." He took his kiss and went down the steps to the taxi.

CHAPTER XII

POSTSCRIPT TO JUDGEMENT

I

LUCY CARTARET was married on a wet and windy Monday in January. Euan arrived breathless in the house just as the bridal party was about to go without him. Lucy gave him no friendly look, and Mr. Cartaret was short of greeting. Even Auntie Mabel wore a grieved expression, and it seemed to Euan that her response was cold when he put his usual perfunctory kiss on her cheek.

They were in the narrow entrance-hall, where there was not room for all of them. Euan's sleeve ruffled his father's silk hat. He stepped hastily aside and trod on one of the bride's new shoes. He wanted to explain why he was late, but none of them would listen to him. Mr. Cartaret was already vexed by the tightness of a morning-coat which he had not worn for several years. Auntie Mabel had dropped to her knees, making clucking noises and trying to rub away the scratches on Lucy's shoe. Lucy, to the back of Auntie Mabel's bowed bonnet below her, was repeating for the tenth time instructions regarding certain sandwiches.

Eventually he was bundled with them into the bride's car. No one spoke until Lucy said, with an acidity which was familiar to Euan: "You might have come yesterday since I asked you, especially when I said it was important. Surely you're free on a Sunday?"

"Hush, dear," said Auntie Mabel in a voice which was half soothing for Lucy, half rebuke for Euan.

" Don't upset yourself now. I expect he had some good reason for not coming or letting us know."

" No reason for him to come," said Mr. Cartaret gruffly. " I said I didn't expect him to be any help."

Euan was about to exclaim that he did not know what they were talking about when the car stopped at the church. Auntie Mabel began to cluck again at seeing that the bride would have to walk through the rain.

" If you run, dear," she said anxiously, " it won't spot your dress much."

Mr. Cartaret assumed an expression of morose dignity and smoothed the nap of his hat. He declined to run, but proceeded solemnly to the church door, not turning to left or right. Lucy, on his arm, was obliged to twist sideways to get under the umbrella which he held, and to hop, skip and jump to avoid the puddles through which he would have marched her. Auntie Mabel, crouching beneath the rain, scuttled after them till they blocked her way. She then bobbed agitatedly from side to side behind them, apparently feeling that so long as she was moving rapidly she was doing her best to avoid getting wet.

" Bride or bridegroom? " Euan was asked by an usher whom he vaguely recognized as a member of the tennis club. A slight convulsion of conscience suggested to him that he ought to have had something to do with these arrangements. He scowled the questioner aside and strode on up the aisle in Auntie Mabel's wake. He was about to follow her into a pew when another usher warned him in a superior tone: " These seats are reserved for the bride's family." He scowled again and sat down, conscious that the usher was saying something superior about him to a colleague.

Auntie Mabel bobbed her head down into her hands and up again. He wondered whether any conscious thought had passed through her mind while her face was covered. She turned to him instantly, her eyes bright and wet with excitement. " Doesn't she look nice? " she said.

Euan was frankly not of that opinion. Lucy, with her scornful common sense, had rejected white satin and orange blossom. Auntie Mabel, remembering how these tokens of successful virtue had been denied to the elder Lucy, had grieved over a lost opportunity of vindicating the family honour. She had done more than that. She had returned from solitary grieving with a soft, persistent determination and had cajoled and wept the bride into a pale blue costume which suited neither the wearer nor the season. Lucy showed in her pose at the altar that she knew it became her ill. Euan wondered why his sister should have chosen to be married in the winter, when the tip of her rather sharp nose took on a bluish red tint. He wished, not for the first time, that she could have learnt the proper use of a powder-puff.

While he was thinking these thoughts, Lucy bent her head abruptly to her father and whispered to him, evidently something snappish. "Oh!" ejaculated Auntie Mabel, as though this scene had stirred something in her mind. "Sandwiches! Euan dear, do remind me about the sandwiches when we get home."

"What sandwiches?"

"Just say 'sandwiches' and I shall know what it means. Hush, now dear! They're beginning."

They began, they went on, they finished. The ceremony which was to enable Lucy Cartaret and Herbert Thoday to live in the same house without the censure of the neighbours went precisely to its end. Mr. Cartaret gave his daughter away with a stately air in which perhaps only Euan detected a tinge of relief. Lucy, sensible as ever, did not boggle at the word "obey." Herbert recited the responses with the readiness of a man used to giving evidence, and said "I will" as though he were swearing an affidavit. Never could any couple have been declared with better justification to have been legally married. It would have made a fitting conclusion if Herbert had taken the entire congregation to drink a glass of sherry with

him in a select bar in the Strand in the company of the other lawyers' clerks.

Instead of that, he conducted Lucy down the aisle striving to suggest by his demeanour that there was a legal basis even for the chords of the Wedding March from *Lohengrin*. Lucy, as they passed Auntie Mabel and Euan, fixed them with a disciplinary look which caused Auntie Mabel to mutter agitatedly "sandwiches" and Euan to remember that he had done something wrong though he still was not able to make out what it was.

As he was taking Auntie Mabel back in the car, a guilty memory shot through his mind. He was almost sure, now he came to think of it, that on Saturday morning among his letters there had been one from Lucy. He had, he gradually convinced himself, opened it, meaning to read it on his way to the laboratory. But he had been in a hurry to get there and finish off one or two jobs in time to catch the train at Waterloo. And anyway, if Lucy had wanted him to go on to Highgate on Saturday or Sunday, he simply couldn't have gone.

He thought of asking Auntie Mabel's counsel on the best way to placate his sister, but when she saw him looking at her, she burst out at once: "Did you see that nearly all the tennis club were there? And *all* the people that used to come to our tennis suppers. Even the Fullers came, though they've moved to Purley. It's so nice to know one's hospitality is appreciated, isn't it? The tennis club sent her a lovely present—that was an official one. Then the women's team sent her one and so did her special friends. She's had some *lovely* presents. Isn't it nice for her to be so popular?"

"Yes," said Euan. "Look here, Auntie Mabel——"

"Sandwiches, sandwiches, sandwiches," said Auntie Mabel. "If I say it over like that, I can't forget it, can I? I don't want Lucy to be vexed to-day. It was so unlucky all this coming just before the wedding. She's not been her own sweet-tempered self since your father told us."

"Told you *what*?" Euan asked irritably.

"Here we are!" cried Auntie Mabel, leaping out of the car without waiting for Euan's help. "Sandwiches!" She scurried up the steps and through the open door, leaving him to follow bewilderedly.

The house, what with the wedding preparations and the preparations for its abandonment, bore a desolate and unfamiliar appearance. Euan turned into his father's study and found that it had been arranged as a cloakroom. A glint of glass in the corner caught his eye, and he found whisky, a siphon, and a glass, which Mr. Cartaret had not quite cunningly enough concealed. He helped himself and went on to do his duty in the drawing-room.

None of the guests had yet arrived, and Lucy was not behaving at all like a helpless bride. "Oh, Auntie Mabel," she was saying in a voice of furious despair, "you haven't remembered what I told you about the sandwiches."

"I did remember the sandwiches, darling," said Auntie Mabel. "It was the first thing I said to myself when we got back. But I'm not sure what you wanted me to do with them."

"I told you——" Lucy cried. "Oh, dear, I'd better do it myself." She paused an unwilling moment to allow Euan to kiss her cheek and mutter something about good luck. Then she bustled away, bridal costume and all, leaving her husband looking as foolish as it is possible for a managing clerk to look when he knows his own prospects to a farthing.

"The best of luck to you, Herbert," Euan said formally, shaking the bridegroom's hand.

"Thanks, old man. Look here, I want a word with you about——"

But before he could say any more, Lucy returned, and played a mysterious game of chess with plates of sandwiches, played it too with an angry concentration that frightened them all into silence, except Auntie Mabel, who emitted a solitary distressed cluck

after each move. Check had barely been given to the potted meat when the guests began to arrive in numbers.

Euan saw that his aunt had been right in saying that all the tennis club were there. He could see them swinging their racquets between games. With one of them, he found himself presently wedged in a corner, a round-faced young lady with round eyes meant by nature to adore someone. Art, however, had also taught them something, which at present she thought more important.

"You must be Lucy's brother," she said. Euan admitted it. "I'm Joan."

"Of course, I know all about you," he replied falsely. "Lucy talks about you."

"Don't you think Lucy's wonderful? No, I'm sure you don't. You couldn't think your own sister wonderful, could you? Men like other people's sisters better."

Euan remembered the saying that one wedding makes many—or was it funerals?—and hurriedly offered to get Joan something to eat. She showed him her heaped plate, but he said: "Oh, you haven't got the right stuff," and retreated from her backwards into the crowd.

A stiff-necked, high-nosed youth, wearing a winged collar and a lounge suit, said to him: "Here, whose house do you think you are in?" He fought his way past this obstacle and round an equally haughty girl who launched after his successful effort the remark: "Some of these extraordinary people ought to have been kept out."

But he could not fight his way to Lucy. The women's team had made a ring round her, inside which stood Herbert, looking longer faced, longer legged, and rather less self-possessed than usual, tolerated but not wanted or regarded. Euan signalled to him and he extricated himself with evident relief. For a moment a common dislike put them in harmony, and they sneaked away to the cloakroom in the spirit of two

schoolboys who have suddenly and shamefacedly discovered that they like one another. Euan remembered to snatch two glasses as they went.

They filled these glasses from Mr. Cartaret's secret store and Herbert said: " Here's how! "

" Here's how! " Euan replied, and they drank. " Now tell me," Euan went on, " what all this trouble is."

Herbert shed at once the embarrassed bridegroom and the truant schoolboy and became again the lawyer's clerk. He slipped off the table on which he was sitting and straddled in front of the anthracite stove. " I don't know how much you know," he began deliberately.

" I don't know anything! " Euan cried in exasperation. " I don't know what you're all talking about! Everything has been settled, hasn't it? "

The effect of this was to make Herbert more legal than ever. He lifted his eyes and swung them round a horizon of dangerous possibilities invisible to his uninstructed brother-in-law. " Hm-m-m-ha," he exclaimed. Then, pausing as though he remembered something, he carefully put his hands under his coat-tails. " I'm not sure . . ." he continued very slowly.

" Good God, what is it? " Euan demanded.

Herbert looked at Euan, and through him, as though beyond his backbone he could see an endless and interesting vista of affidavits, pleadings, and counter-pleadings, and applications to Masters in Chancery. He seemed to tear himself away from this prospect, and said with an effort: " Well, I suppose you ought to know. . . . As a matter of fact, your old man has got himself mixed up a bit in this Blabey smash. He isn't the only one, and, mind you, I don't really think you ought to blame yourself very much."

" What on earth do you mean? " asked Euan, taken aback and astray among several questions.

" Well, of course, it's no excuse for him that he didn't trust his own judgement," said Herbert, bending

to press down the knees of his trousers, which, since they were new, did not need it. " He was the responsible person, after all, and from the legal point of view no blame attaches to you."

" I still don't know what you're talking about," Euan said wearily.

" My dear chap, really, you know," Herbert ejaculated with a snap of his long fingers, " your father, being a lawyer himself—I suppose you'd call him a lawyer—ought to have had more sense than to put what were virtually trust funds into Blabey's companies. And you ought to have had more sense than to advise him to do it. As a matter of fact——" Herbert went on with reluctance: " As a matter of fact, if they'd come to me as clients I'm not sure I should even have advised them to take proceedings against your father. So you're all right on the legal side. Oh, yes, you're quite clear there."

" But . . . you don't mean . . ."

" Yes—he didn't get out in time. But surely you realized that he wouldn't? "

" This is all news to me," Euan said. " Has Lucy's money gone? "

" Not all of it. We may get three or four shillings in the pound. It won't matter so much for Lucy. I can look after my own wife—not that it doesn't make a difference. But it matters to Auntie Mabel. It'd matter a good deal to your father if we pressed the thing home—not much better than malversation of funds, if you ask me." Again Herbert smoothed down the knees of his trousers and looked as though he were so hardened to being asked questions of this sort that he positively liked it. " I suppose he's past it a bit and he took your word that Blabey couldn't go wrong."

Euan looked round at the coats and hats piled on the chairs and tables, seeking to assure himself that the world had not suddenly turned unreal. " I never said . . ." he gasped. " He never asked me. . . ."

Herbert shrugged his shoulders unsympathetically.

" He says you gave him tips direct from Blabey's mouth. But don't you worry. Your father will find it hard to make both ends meet, I should imagine, but that's his own affair. We shall look after Auntie Mabel—we settled it all yesterday. She's coming to live with us. I dare say she'll be helpful—especially later, when the little ones come along. And there's a lot to be said for it. Nuisance, you know, never being able to go out at night because of leaving the house empty. You needn't bother, old man, we'll look after Auntie Mabel all right. And you mustn't blame yourself *too* much."

Having said this, Herbert moved as though to indicate that the consultation was over. Euan, however, would have continued to argue. He had only got as far as saying in tones of disgust: " My father's a bloody liar," when the door opened and the girl Joan interrupted him.

" Mr. Thoday," she cried, " do you know that Lucy has gone up to change? If you don't change too, you won't be ready when she is. I know how it is with you men when you get together." (Here she shot a glance at Euan.) " But you *must* go now."

Half an hour later, Euan, a little calmer, was able to talk to his father. Herbert had taken Lucy, dressed in the sensible tweeds that suited her, to catch the afternoon train for Torquay. The younger and the more excitable members of the tennis club had followed them round the corner of Taunton Road, throwing rice, confetti, and slippers. Mr. Cartaret had shown a wholly unnatural desire to take part in this riot, to persuade the guests to prolong the party, to do anything, in short, rather than find himself alone with his son.

But Euan was inexorable. He cleared the house without much courtesy, then took his father into what might now again be regarded as a study. He poured himself out another drink with great deliberation and said: " Now, Father, what's all this about Lucy's money

and Auntie Mabel's?" As he spoke, he suddenly felt the indecency of taking this magisterial tone. To hide his embarrassment, he gazed out of the window. A few members of the tennis club were still clustered near the gate in lively discussion of some mad suburban gaiety.

When he turned again, Mr. Cartaret's momentary frightened expression had been replaced by one of cold dignity. "It's a little late in the day, my boy," he said, "to talk about that. We might have been glad of your views yesterday."

"Wasn't it a little late in the day to talk about it yesterday?" Euan suggested. "You must have known all about it long ago."

"It was my duty," said Mr. Cartaret, "not to alarm anyone while hope remained. I bore the burden, my boy, as long as I could. At last I felt that I must share it."

"In other words, you couldn't keep it dark any longer?"

"It is a pity you weren't here yesterday," said Mr. Cartaret, "to defend your friend Blabey."

"You don't tell me that I advised you to put money into Blabey's companies. You told Herbert that, didn't you?"

"I take full responsibility," said Mr. Cartaret gravely, "for all I have done—no matter how I may have been deceived."

"You will," said Euan. "Herbert will see to that."

"My boy, you don't mean—Herbert didn't say—he said yesterday——"

"Don't be afraid, Father." Euan was suddenly sorry he had inflicted this pitiable alarm, sorry he had begun the whole profitless conversation. What satisfaction was to be gained from savaging a helpless creature, however much one might dislike him? "Don't be afraid," he said again. "I only meant that he'll probably make you feel it."

This seemed to be a consolation to Mr. Cartaret,

who believed himself proof against the attempt of others to make him feel what he did not want to feel. "Naturally, I shall see," he announced with an effort at renewed pomp, "that no one suffers from what I have done. I have examples to encourage me," he continued. "The pen, Euan, is a great weapon. Older men than I, my boy, men like Scott and Mark Twain, restored their fortunes with their pens."

"Don't trouble yourself about Auntie Mabel," Euan said. "I'll arrange that she doesn't have to ask Herbert for pocket-money and clothes." He looked at his watch and saw that, if he were to call for Mona at six, as he had promised, he must delay no longer.

Besides, the spectacle of his father maintaining a pretence of dignity was more painful than he could bear to prolong. Mr. Cartaret's mouth and his voice were both out of control, and his hands were trembling. He shuffled to the corner where the whisky stood, mixed himself a stiff drink and gulped it nervously. Euan had a queer childish impulse of pity in which he wanted to throw his arms round the poor empty man and comfort him.

He dismissed the absurd idea and said civilly: "I must go. Where is Auntie Mabel?"

"I don't know, my boy. Er—shall we look for her?"

His father's anxiety to please renewed Euan's shame. He stood awkwardly for a moment in the door of the disordered room, trying vainly to find words which should at least restore the surface of things. "Don't bother, I'll find her," he jerked at last and closed the door quickly behind him.

It was not difficult. She was in the still more disordered drawing-room, in a chair drawn up to the buffet-table, eating a sandwich and sipping a glass of flat champagne. Euan surmised that it was one which some thoughtless guest had left untasted. Only the fear of waste would have induced her to drink wine of her own free will. She still wore her best silk dress,

but she had put on an apron and a pair of carpet slippers, which were trodden down at the heel.

"Oh, Euan," she said, rising as though in guilt. "I thought you'd gone. You see, I couldn't eat anything this afternoon and at lunch——"

He pressed her back into her chair.

"Have one of these sandwiches," she said. "They're so good and they've hardly been touched."

He shook his head. "I only came to say good-bye. And . . . Auntie . . . . I don't want you to have to ask Herbert or Lucy for money . . . leave that to me—I'll write to you . . . and . . . if ever you're not happy with them, you know . . . I mean, I have more than I spend."

"Oh, Euan!" She sprang up again with a light in her humble eyes that he had never seen before. Though there had been no embrace between them since he had been a little boy, he found it quite natural to put his arms round her. After a few moments, she murmured: "I'm only crying be-because it's so kind of you. I'm quite sure I shall be happy with them. Isn't it wonderful that Herbert wants me? And—and, of course I may be useful to them when . . . I do hope you're going to be happy too, dear." She dared not go further, but asked her question with yearning eyes.

He smiled, a little on one side. "I'm all right," he said clumsily. "Don't worry about me." He patted her shoulder and kissed her small, thin cheek. "Now I must go."

She insisted on going with him to the door, and he walked with an arm absurdly round her waist. As he said good-bye, her beseeching expression, which still persisted, was too much for him and he cried with an attempt at good humour: "*No!* I'm *not* going to be married. If ever I am, I'll tell you first."

"Will you really, dearest?"

He made a grave promise, and hurried down the steps, wondering where he could find a taxi. He

was particularly anxious not to keep Mona waiting to-night. But fortunately he did not. When he entered the Euterpe Wireless Galleries of Messrs. Dykes and Wallace, she was still not ready for him. It amused and touched him to see her very serious and business-like, explaining a batch of order-forms to another girl. He was watching, himself unseen, the other side of her life and he was entranced. When she caught sight of him, she waved him aside and disappeared.

She returned presently, dressed for the street, and said: "I'm so sorry, darling. But being late this morning has made me behind all day."

"You didn't get into trouble?"

"Oh, no. I explained to Mr. Dykes about the time it took to get across Waterloo Bridge and he was perfectly sweet. He looked at me as though he wondered where I'd been, but he didn't say anything. Euan, we won't go to the Bran Pie to-night—do you mind? Let's go to a restaurant where we shan't see anyone we know. Did it matter that you were late at the laboratory?"

II

The little clerk from the estate agent's office was in the habit of saying that he always got on very well with the tenants of Bromwich Mansions so long as they wanted to get on well with him. When he said this, standing with his legs apart, his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back of his head and a small Bass in front of him (for he usually said it in the saloon bar of the Goat at eleven-thirty and again about six), you realized that it would be just as well for them to want to get on with him. He was one of those smallish men who are determined to stand no nonsense. He sometimes reflected with satisfaction on how little he had stood in the course of his forty years in the world.

But he was more than usually ready to get on with young Mrs. Bullace, for anyone could see with half

an eye that she was a very good-looking girl. Therefore when she opened the door to him and said that her husband was out, he answered cheerfully: "That don't matter, Mrs. Bullace, we can get this little business settled without him," and pressed by her into the narrow passage.

"I think my husband would rather see you himself," she objected.

"Oh, that's not necessary—not necessary at all." He thrust his hand back into his trouser-pocket since she seemed not to want to shake it. A bit shy, he supposed, which would make her all the easier to handle. He'd make her see in two shakes that the landlord wouldn't do anything for her.

As she still stood there, looking at him in some perplexity, he went on and turned a door-handle. "This is the sitting-room, isn't it?" he asked. "Thought so. I could find my way blindfold about any of these flats. Now come on in, Mrs. Bullace, and let's talk this little trouble over." He entered before her, staring round at the furniture and saying to himself: "Forty-nine instalments still to pay! Nothing here that would be any good to us." He swung round on his heel and stared at Phyllis, trying to decide in his mind whether she were really married.

"I think you ought to see my husband," she repeated, finding him like nothing in her experience. She supposed that George would know better than she did how to deal with this sort of person.

"But he's not here, is he? You know, I can't be for ever coming up and down all these stairs. Besides, I've heard all he's got to say. I had his letter. I've got it here, for all the good it is." He slapped his pocket. "Now suppose you show me the trouble, Mrs. Bullace. I've seen the damage that's been done downstairs."

Baffled and resentful, she led him to the little kitchen. Here again he ran an appraising eye over the plates and dishes, which were, he noted, the fewest they

could possibly manage with, and glanced at a glass bottle of soup which stood on the table. "Not much sense in those glass things, if you ask me," he remarked. "Tins are just as good, and cheaper. But newly-weds always go for glass till they learn better. You girls to-day, if you'll excuse me saying so, Mrs. Bullace, know nothing about anything but clothes and typewriters when you get married."

"Here's where the leak was," said Phyllis coldly. "We had it repaired for the time, of course."

He felt her manner at last, and his own changed. "Ah," he said briskly, fixing her with a stare like dulled steel, "I know that boiler. The last people had a lot of trouble with it. It's an old boiler, that's what's the matter with it. If you'll take my advice, you'll have a new one put in. Save you money in the end. It's your responsibility, you know, not ours. To say nothing of the damage downstairs. That's *their* responsibility, so far as we're concerned, but they'll expect you to put it right."

"But I don't think we should be responsible," Phyllis argued, "if it's an old boiler. We've not been here a month yet. You ought to have given us a new one."

"You took the flat as it was, didn't you? *And* undertook to do all repairs. You look at the agreement, Mrs. Bullace, and you'll see that I'm right. And if you'll take my advice, you'll have it seen to at once before it gets worse. It won't be a cheap job, as it is."

Phyllis hoped that she did not show the dismay she felt. She did not know how they were to find money for repairs. She consoled herself with the thought that this unpleasant little man was trying to bluff her, and that George would know how to put him in his place. "I'll tell my husband what you say," she informed him aloofly.

"You tell him," he said with a disagreeable smile, "but that won't make it any different. Don't bother to come to the door, Mrs. Bullace, if you're getting

your hubbie's supper." He waved at the bottle of soup. "I can find my own way out."

She ignored this and showed him out with cold politeness. When she opened the door she saw a figure standing on the shadowy landing, about to put a finger to the bell. "Oh, Babs," she cried in relief, "it *is* nice to see you!"

The estate agent's clerk rammed his hat on his head and his hands in his pockets. "Well, Mrs. Bullace," he said, "you'll have it seen to at once, won't you? We can't let the property deteriorate, you know. And there's the flat below, don't forget." He went down-stairs, saying to himself: "Better keep an eye on those people. They'll bolt and leave the furniture behind, as like as not."

Phyllis had not answered him. She was drawing Babs into the sitting-room with almost pitiful eagerness. "It *is* nice of you to come," she repeated. "I was just feeling deadly. I've been alone since George went out this morning, and I don't know when he'll be back."

"Who was the little man?" asked Babs, sitting on the divan on which forty-nine instalments remained to be paid.

"Oh, someone from the landlord of this hole, trying to make us do something he ought to do himself." Phyllis spoke airily, as though she had spent half a lifetime in meeting and defeating the landlords of cheap flats in West Hampstead. "It's time we made them do something, I think. I shall complain about those filthy stairs."

Babs, who knew a good deal about cheap flats and their landlords, smiled sympathetically, if a little ironically. "What have you been doing all day?" she asked.

"Have a cigarette," Phyllis offered. "I wonder where they are. Oh, yes!" She found a crumpled packet on the mantelpiece and peered into it with a dubious look. "Only three left," she said. "Never

mind; George is sure to have some when he comes in." She lit Babs's cigarette and her own, and sat in the arm-chair, curling her long legs under her. "What have I been doing? I went for a walk this afternoon till it was worse than staying at home."

"George very busy?" Babs asked.

"He's been out all day, so he must be. He doesn't say much about what he's doing. I wish he'd let me try to get something to do."

"Won't he?"

"It upsets him whenever I suggest it, so I try not to think about it. We could do with the money though. But I know he's got some big plan on hand. I suppose he'll tell me about it when he's brought it off." She spoke cheerfully, but Babs's quick eyes saw a little involuntary twist of the mouth. Babs's quick mind noted no less Phyllis's attempt to turn the subject by saying: "How do you like your new job?"

"I'm not grumbling," Babs answered. "I was lucky to get one so soon." She had begun a satirical story about her new employer, when they heard a key turning in the front door.

"There he is," said Phyllis. Babs wondered whether she would go to meet him. But she did not, and George, when he entered, gave only a perfunctory greeting to both of them.

"Hullo, Babs," he said. "Hullo, dear." Then, still at the door, he opened the letter he was holding. His movements were quick and nervous, as though he were in a condition of some excitement. As he read the single typewritten sheet, his expression changed. A shadow of anger passed over his dark face, and he lifted his hand as a man does when he has received a blow and does not want to show that it has shaken him. He showed his teeth for a moment and his lips soundlessly shaped the words "Of all the——" With an effort he changed the grimace into a smile and thrust the letter into his pocket.

"Who's it from?" Phyllis asked.

"No one important. Will it run to a cocktail, darling? I'm tired." He looked very tired, more so than when he had come in.

"I think we've finished the gin," said Phyllis. "I'll go and look." As she was crossing the room, he put out his hand so that it brushed her skirt.

There was a moment's silence when he and Babs were alone together. She gave him an enquiring look.

"Oh, things are all right, really," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Of course, to be perfectly honest, the connection with Blabey doesn't do me any good just now. But that will be forgotten sooner or later."

"And Phyllis?"

"It's not always easy to—make her happy. Especially now that she's got over the first shock. She's beginning to miss things. It's a pity I had to sell the car. But we'll be all right presently, when I've turned the corner. Have you seen my precious mother-in-law lately?"

Babs shrugged her shoulders with a contemptuous smile. "I've heard from her. She's just the same. Her letter just repeated the first she wrote to me about you and Phyllis. She thinks it was very heartless of you both to get married at such a time, and she can't trust herself to see either of you—yet. You know what's in her mind, I suppose?"

"I can guess."

"She's making sure," said Babs, nodding, "that you can't ask her for help."

"Hell of a lot of good she could do," George muttered. "Two hundred a year and all tied up! And even if she would, Phyllis would see her damned first. Phyllis can be very obstinate when she likes."

Babs raised a warning finger just before the door opened. Phyllis came in carrying a tray on which stood three glasses. "There was just enough gin," she said cheerfully, "to give it a flavour."

"I mustn't stay," Babs said, standing up to take her cocktail.

"Oh," Phyllis protested, "you didn't come so far out of your way just for ten minutes. We can give you a scratch meal, if you'll wait a little."

"I only wanted to see how you were getting on," Babs said, with her tiny enigmatic smile.

"But you must stay, mustn't she, George?"

George had his back to them and was turning over papers on the flap of a flimsy little writing-desk. He dragged angrily at a drawer, pulled the handle off, and cursed under his breath. "Rotten stuff, all this furniture," he muttered; and then, turning, asked: "What did you say?"

"No," Babs repeated. "I mustn't stay—however much George presses me. Good-bye, children, and be happy."

George said nothing, and Phyllis, looking sulky, said: "Well, if you won't, you won't."

They both accompanied her to the door and watched her disappear among the ill-lit shadows of the stairs. Phyllis shivered. "This is a horribly depressing staircase," she murmured. "Why didn't you want Babs to stay?"

"I want you, not Babs."

"Then you can come and talk to me while I get supper ready."

"There's no hurry for supper," said Bullace, with a pleading note in his voice. As he spoke, he led her, with an arm round her waist, into the sitting-room. She did not resist, but she was stiff in his embrace, and when he pulled her with him into the arm-chair, she sprawled on his lap like a doll.

"We oughtn't to do this," she said, as soon as his mouth left hers. "I'm sure this furniture won't stand it." He tried to drag her into a more comfortable position. "There," she laughed, "I heard the springs go." She wriggled out of his grasp and pretended to look for the damage.

"All right," he said wearily. "Go and get supper if you want to.'

"Are you coming to talk to me?"

"I'll come in a minute." But when she had gone, he lit a cigarette and sat where he was, staring blackly in front of him. He could not, he knew, watch her moving about the kitchen without continually wanting to touch her, and whether she avoided the touch, or submitted to it for an impatient moment, it would be the same to him. Presently he went to the little dining-room and there mixed himself a whisky and soda, took it back and drank it alone. When Phyllis brought the soup in, he was pouring out another.

They spoke little at supper, until George said: "Do you know what became of that girl who used to be at Elspeth's? Mona Fenwick, I mean."

Phyllis neither knew, nor knew of any reason why she should. But she said politely: "No, do you?"

"I just wondered whether we could get in touch with her again. As a matter of fact, little Kirkie has been asking after her very anxiously."

"Lord Kirkmabreck?" she exclaimed in some surprise. "Have you seen him?"

He nodded. "I ran into him by accident a little while ago, and we've met two or three times since. I fancy he got himself into trouble over Mona and promised not to see her. Now he's sorry and wants to make it up."

"I don't know anything about her," Phyllis said briefly.

"I just thought if you knew where she was, we might ask her and Kirkie to a meal together. He may be useful to me, so remember if you come across her."

"That's not likely," she answered as briefly as before. "Now go into the sitting-room and I'll bring coffee when I've washed up."

"Can't I help?"

She shook her head. "That's my work. I must do something to earn my keep, mustn't I?" As she spoke, she smiled, but she also looked absent-mindedly at her hands, as though reckoning what effect washing-up was

having on them. A wave of impotent resentment against an unfriendly world passed through him. He got up heavily, and went in silence to the sitting-room.

There he sat at the little writing-desk, and tried to spread some papers in front of him. But this piece of furniture was made for the writing of post-cards and for the writing of only one at a time. He struggled for several minutes, gingerly transferring figures from a note-book to a scribbling-pad, until he carelessly leant on the flap of the desk. It was not meant to be leant on. It tilted abruptly and viciously towards him and threw a brass ash-tray and a calendar from the top with a clatter to the floor. When Phyllis, after a considerable time, brought the coffee, he was in the arm-chair again, staring at nothing.

"Cheer up, George," she said awkwardly, laying a hand on his shoulder. "You've had a tiring day."

"I'm all right," he replied, looking up at her over the coffee-tray. "I'm only worried about you alone here all day with nothing to do."

She shrugged her shoulders. "It can't be helped. But I shall be glad when we can get out of this beastly place." Then she told him about the visit from the estate agent's clerk.

"I'll write to them again," he said frowning. "That'll stave them off for some time."

"But shall we have to pay for it, George?" she asked anxiously.

"I expect so. But I can't bother about things like that now. I don't want to bother about anything now. Come to me, darling."

With little concealed reluctance, she went and stood beside him. He put his arms round her knees and dragged at them so that again she fell on him in an undignified attitude. "Don't be silly, George," she cried with a laugh in which she failed to suppress the angry undertone.

"Now I've got you," he said with heavy-breathing playfulness. She struggled for a moment, then went

limp and passive, and once more he had a scalding sense of eternal failure.

"Don't you like me to love you?" he muttered.

"Sometimes I do," she replied in the voice of an uneasy child, "and sometimes I don't."

"And this is one of the times when you don't?"

"Yes, it is." She scrambled away from him and he let her go. She stood looking at him and mechanically smoothing her skirt. "I'm sorry, George," she said. "You must find me very unsatisfactory."

"All right, dear," he answered with an effort. "You know how I love you." He knew, even as he uttered the words, how useless it was to add: "You do love me, don't you?"

"Sometimes!" And now her laugh was free and almost happy. He smiled at her and she leant and brushed his forehead with soft, unmoving lips. "George," she went on, pleased that he did not put out his hands to her again, "can you give me some money for to-morrow? I hadn't a penny to-day."

"Will a pound do?" He brought a sheaf of papers out of his pocket, and an envelope fell from among them on to his knee. "Here you are."

"Who's writing to you from Los Angeles?" she asked curiously, ignoring the proffered money. "Are you going to be a film star?"

"No one you know." The reply was quick, and so was his movement to take the envelope from her. But she neither gave it to him nor took the pound-note.

"Have you been writing to Barbara?" Her voice was deliberate and told him that she already knew the answer. "Was that the letter you had when you came in?"

"As a matter of fact, it was." He laughed uncomfortably. "You're a quick guesser, aren't you? But it isn't anything that would interest you. It's only about some business I had with her before she left England."

"Let me see it, George." He did not move. "Were

you asking her to find you a job? Were you trying to borrow money?" He said nothing. "George, was it that? Tell me! She refused, I suppose."

"Well, Barbara owes me something," he began defensively. "I got her that first job out there, and I took no commission on it. And now I've a chance of a very promising deal if only I could find a couple of hundred or so to go in with. Besides, we want a little to carry on until the deal is through."

She continued to look at him thoughtfully for some moments. At last she said: "You might have known she would refuse. You know she didn't write to me when—when we had our trouble. George, I wish you'd let me look for a job if we're as badly off as that."

"I don't want you to have a job," he cried passionately. "I'd do anything rather than think of you working for someone else—being ordered about——" He choked and stopped, staring at her with appeal in his eyes.

"Very well." There was a long silence, during which both remained motionless. "I'm going to bed now," she announced finally.

"I'm ready," he said, jumping up.

"No, don't, George. You know I like being alone while I'm getting ready for bed. I'll bring you the whisky." She went out, and he took his note-book and began turning over the figure-scribbled pages.

III

Even though the fall of Sir Maurice Blabey was admittedly a blow to him, few if any of Bray's friends would ever have detected in his manner the faintest hint of growing gloom. For a week or more after that sad event, his voice was a thought lower, his gusto in his work subdued. But that, one knew, was a ceremonial tribute to one who, like many a good soldier in Bray's experience, had stumbled upon trouble. The

Sergeant took coats and hats, acknowledged greetings and exacted half-crowns for guests with his customary air of a living and alert monument. But Mrs. Badger, that connoisseur in depression, knew that, beyond the transitory mourning, doubt was gnawing at his heart. She knew also how quickest to touch the delicate point.

"*He's* looking more worried-like than ever," she said enticingly, leaning against the counter and watching Bray as he put the finishing touches to his cloakroom with a broom.

"It's the weather," Bray gruffly replied. "The guv'nor always feels 'is liver a bit when the wind's in the east."

"It's the club," Mrs. Badger asserted. So much did she look and sound like a bird of ill omen that one might have expected her to fly up to one of the hat-racks and continue her discourse from there. She remained, however, on solid ground and said heavily: "It's all that's happened."

Bray turned on her, unconsciously bringing his broom to the ready. "What's happened?" he asked with controlled indignation. "Everything's going on as usual, isn't it? The club's still here."

"So far," Mrs. Badger admitted, wiping her nose in a manner that would of itself have alarmed the club's creditors.

"And it'll be 'ere when you've gloomed yourself into the grave." He swung round again and betrayed his agitation by dashing the broom through the heap of dust that he had collected. "Or out of a job," he added, with a spitefulness unusual in him.

"I hope I don't put you off your work, Mr. Bray," she murmured with delicate sarcasm.

"I wouldn't 'ave this work to do," he exclaimed, still over his shoulder, "if that friend of yours would sweep up the dust instead of blowing at it. What made you palm her off on the guv'nor?"

"Ah, poor girl, she was working for a club that was closed. Left with three weeks owing, she was, and

I couldn't bear to see it. What I always say, Mr. Bray, you never know when you won't want a kindness yourself."

" I 'ope you'll get it," Bray muttered.

" I 'ope neither you nor I'll ever come to need it," said Mrs. Badger piously.

Bray snorted and turned round, bestowing on his colleague the smile of a man who is determined to triumph though he has interior doubts. " Since you're so worried, Mrs. Badger," he said, " I'll tell you a little secret. The guv'nor *has* been having a little trouble lately, what with these stairs and poor Sir Maurice being unable to 'elp. But 'e's all right now, because 'e's found the capital 'e wanted. Told me so this morning 'imself. So you can go and worry about that, Mrs. Badger."

" I will," she replied in the most annoyingly unexpected way. It seemed that this was no news to her. " I know he has and I know where he found it. I heard him talking about it to Mr. Damara, and I dare say I heard a bit more than he told you this morning. And do you know what I say about it, Mr. Bray? "

" I don't know, and I don't care," cried the thoroughly irritated Sergeant.

" I say: ' God 'elp us all,' " Mrs. Badger declared with liturgical solemnity. " I worked for that man once—when I did cleaning, that was."

" And you'll be doing cleaning again if you aren't ready in your room when the ladies come," said Bray, despairing of overcoming her by fair means. Fortunately for him, the door below banged on his last word, and the sound seemed to blow her across the landing like a wind in her dingy skirts, while Bray pulled on his coat and with it regained his habitual composure.

The first arrivals proved to be persons no more formidable than the two Telluses and Euan. Harry delicately guided Huffy towards her cloakroom, saying: " We won't wait for you. We'll go on ahead."

Euan said: " Miss Fenwick here yet, Bray? "

" Not yet, sir," Bray replied.

Huffy said: " You won't be long in the Bar Parlour, will you? You'll come down after two drinks, won't you? " She disappeared, but could be heard explaining to Mrs. Badger that she was in no hurry because she must let the two men get into the Bar Parlour before she ventured on the stairs. Otherwise, she said, they would feel that they ought not to leave her alone. " Funny, isn't it? " she reflected aloud. " But it's so much easier when you know."

" It's not all the ladies that are like you, mum," Mrs. Badger remarked, divided between admiration and pity. " Most of 'em are at the mirror one moment, and then at the door the next, and their faces half-powdered, shouting: ' Wait for me! Don't go up! I'm just ready! ' Huffy smiled tolerantly, as she thought of all the ladies who were not married to Mr. Tellus and [or so she hoped] would not ever be married to him.

Across the way, Bray said: " Do you ever see anything of Major Bullace, sir? "

Euan shook his head, and added: " He's not been here since the—trouble, has he? "

" Not once," said Bray, looking solemn, as he always did when the fall of Sir Maurice Blabey was mentioned. He also said, as he always did: " A sad business that, sir."

" I've seen him," said Harry suddenly. " About a week ago. By Jove, I'd forgotten! I saw him in the dive at the Blue Posts. He and Kirkmabreck had their heads so close together that I didn't like to interrupt them. I wonder how Kirkie's relations would like to see him hob-nobbing with Blabey's son-in-law? "

" Kirkmabreck was always an ass," said Euan with cold nonchalance, putting his hands into his pockets and strolling towards the stairs. Harry, for Bray's benefit, went through an elaborate but ineffectual pantomime of kicking himself.

" You're getting too stout for that, sir," said Bray, laughing heartily.

"I'm getting into my dotage, Bray," Harry replied. "That's what's the matter with me. Good thing I'm going to settle down, isn't it?"

"I'll believe that when I see it, Mr. Tellus," the Sergeant declared.

"Well, you're going to see it. Or rather, you won't, but you'll know it." And with these enigmatic words, Harry pursued Euan towards the Bar Parlour.

Euan was frowning a little, not only because Harry had been tactless, but also because Mona was late. He found, rather to his own astonishment, that nowadays he was often unreasonably short-tempered about small things, such as unpunctuality. Once or twice he had sulked with Mona because she had kept him waiting, and each time he had been ashamed of himself but quite unable to soften to her apologies or her attempts to blandish him.

To-night he did well in resolving to be more gracious to her, for she was not to be blamed for being late. She had hurried to Gilderoy Street, tired but contented, because she had had a successful day and Mr. Dykes had been pleased with her. An impatient customer had been rude to her in his hearing, and he had taken her part and afterwards congratulated her on her tact. So her job there was secure, and promotion was not impossible. Mr. Dykes, with his white hair and gentle eyes, was a pleasing change from Mr. Rosenberg. And it was not part of the ordinary routine to alter the price-ticket when the customer was not looking. Her rent, moreover, was paid up to date and there was money in her purse.

Now, she thought, she would change at leisure as the preliminary to a pleasant, care-free evening in Euan's company. She was in a mood to find a charm even in her little, cheap, uncomfortable room. The gas-fire glowed almost cheerfully and somehow softened the harshness of the electric light. The size of the room took on the more favourable of its two aspects. To-night it was convenient that she could get things out

of the chest of drawers while sitting on her bed instead of being inconvenient that there was hardly space for her to turn round between them.

She slipped off her dress, put on a wrap and sat on the floor in front of the gas-fire to attend to her nails. She was polishing them, pausing from time to time to look meditatively at the result, when there was a knock. "Come in," she cried, in some apprehension.

It was, as she had feared, Mrs. Battcock, and, springing up, she assumed an air of extreme haste. "I'm just rushing to get off," she explained none too encouragingly.

"Oh," said Mrs. Battcock, hesitating apologetically in the doorway. "I—well, it doesn't matter, dear, really. I just came to say good-bye, that's all."

Mona's first instinct was to rejoice: there was a chance that now she might have a more congenial neighbour. But there was a forlornness in Mrs. Battcock's voice which gave her pause. And Mrs. Battcock's heavy, bluish face was drawn into lugubrious lines and her heavy but pathetic lower lip trembled a little. In one hand she held out a china ornament which represented a cat on a wall spitting down at a barking dog. It was a truly dreadful piece of *bric-à-brac*

"I thought you might like to have this," she said, "to remember me by. I wanted to take you to the pictures one night for a good-bye treat, but I wasn't able to catch you. I don't seem to have been able to catch you at all lately. And to-night I've got to pack. So I got you this."

"But that's sweet of you, Mrs. Battcock," cried Mona, deeply touched. "Only you shouldn't have done it." For she naturally assumed that Mrs. Battcock's departure was due to her being too far behind with the rent for Mrs. Williams to pardon.

"I got it in Oxford Street," said Mrs. Battcock, "at a shop where they're selling off. Do you like it?" She herself regarded it with mournful admiration. "They were reduced from five and eleven."

"It's charming," Mona assured her, placing it

reverently on the mantelpiece, and gazing at it with what she hoped would pass for gratitude. "But where are you going?" she went on hastily.

Mrs. Battcock sat down on the bed, in a manner resembling a loose heap of stones settling into place. "I'm going back to mother," she said. "You see, dear, Tom's dead." Mona uttered a little exclamation. "Yes, it's strange, isn't it? It startled *me*. But he's dead. He died at Birmingham," she added, as though this made it sound more convincing. "I didn't even know he was at Birmingham, but of course he often went there because of his business." She paused to sniff.

"I suppose he was a commercial traveller?" said Mona, to fill in the silence.

"No, dear," Mrs. Battcock replied unexpectedly, "he was a private enquiry agent—divorce and that. Such a trying profession, because of his deafness, you know. And his health, too. The last time I heard from him was a picture post card from Liverpool, saying he had a touch of the old complaint."

"And was that the beginning of his illness?" Mona asked. "What was it?"

"Kidneys, dear," Mrs. Battcock answered and sighed. She sighed again before going on. "So now, you see, I can go back to mother. Tom wouldn't have liked me to do that while he was alive and I shouldn't have liked it either. But now anyone would say it was the proper thing to do, wouldn't they?"

"I'm sure they would," said Mona, apparently, however, ill-concealing her difficulty in following the argument.

"If I'd gone back to mother before, it would have looked as though Tom and I were living apart, wouldn't it?" Mrs. Battcock elucidated. "Instead of which, here I was, practically waiting for him, as you might say, to join me. Which he would have done but for his business."

"Where does your mother live?" Mona asked,

feeling a great need to show her sympathy but finding it hard to think of anything to say.

"Near Reading, dear. Not in Reading, of course, but just outside, you know, quite a nice place and there's a nice picture house in easy reach. I shall like living with mother again. We shall have many a good laugh together, I expect." Mona tried to picture the joint hilarities of Mrs. Battcock and her mother, but she failed. "She always used to laugh at Tom living so much in hotels. That was her great joke. I dare say she'll have a good laugh at him dying in one." She paused, looked at Mona rather anxiously, and asked: "There isn't any harm in that, is there? I mean, it can't hurt him now?"

"Of course not," Mona assured her. "I expect he'd laugh at it himself."

"He used to get rather short sometimes," Mrs. Battcock averred with a doubtful expression, "when mother teased him about the chambermaids. She did go on so, and he knew what she was saying even if he couldn't hear it all. But do you know, dear, that I thought of another joke, only of course I didn't say it. When I told Mrs. Williams I was leaving, I nearly said to her: 'You know, dearie, it isn't me, it's Mr. Battcock.' I wonder what she would have thought of that?"

"I'm sorry you're going," said Mona, "but I'm sure you're going to be happy. You and your mother will have so much to talk about, won't you?"

Mrs. Battcock wiped away one or two tears with a fold of her kimono, but Mona suspected that they were to a large extent tears of happiness. "Mother's too old to go to the pictures now," she said, "but she will so enjoy hearing all about them when I come home." Her eyes were still a little damp but the lugubrious expression had faded from her face, and had been replaced by a look of distant, dreaming anticipation. So much comforted did she seem, indeed, that Mona found courage to hint that it was getting late.

"Yes, dear, I mustn't hinder you, must I?" said Mrs. Battcock standing up. She paused a moment more in pensive admiration of the dog and cat on the mantelpiece. "That cat is just like mother's Johnnie," she declared. "Such a wonderful cat and so good. I'm looking forward to seeing Johnnie again. Well, good-bye, Miss Fenwick. I'm sure it's been so nice having you for a neighbour. Now some people——" Here Mona uttered a small involuntary "T-ck!" of impatience and Mrs. Battcock went on hastily: "I mustn't keep you. But if ever you come down our way, you'll come and see me, won't you?"

She went at last, and Mona looked at the time and, after a smothered exclamation, dived head foremost into her dress. She was going to be late in meeting Euan, and she was not sure how he would receive her excuse. But Euan was drinking with Horace Griffin in the Bar Parlour and was tolerably interested.

Horace was moody and seemed almost nervous. "Has Mr. Farwig been in?" he demanded of fat Philip.

"I haven't seen him since that once, sir," Philip replied.

"You don't mean that you've let him in again?" Euan asked in some disgust.

"As the lady says in the opera: My life is a song and Bertie is the refrain. You can't keep Bertie out; he always comes back. Sooner or later we meet in a bar and he buys me a double brandy and what can you do after that?"

"He's a loathsome creature," said Euan dispassionately.

"He keeps the place from getting refined. Every club ought to have one member who can't take his liquor like a gentleman, just to keep the tone down a bit. We're getting too refined as it is. Too many dinner-jackets, and too many liqueurs drunk and not enough beer. Bertie isn't doing his job, though. He hasn't been here since the evening I brought him back. I suspect our Bertie of being up to something."

"Something dirty," said Euan, still with a complete absence of passion.

"Something dirty, of course. I give you something dirty," Horace conceded generously. "And, by the way, there's another member of the club that I want to see, and that's George Bullace."

Euan looked surprised, and Horace went on: "He won't come here now, of course—that's only to be expected. But he might keep appointments when he makes them. He's played me up pretty badly, if you want to know. I suppose you've gathered that we want some more capital to carry on with here? Bullace strung me along promising to find me a backer instead of Blabey and persuaded me to turn two perfectly good suckers away from the door. They've gone now." Horace's bloodshot eyes grew darker as he contemplated two perfectly good suckers disappearing below the horizon.

Euan made sympathetic noises, and Horace continued his uneasy monologue. "The last time," he said gloomily, "he telephoned that he was detained—as they say. To-night he didn't even telephone. I waited nearly an hour for him at the Blue Posts and he didn't turn up. I know what that means. Backer! I don't suppose he can find anyone to buy him lunch. He made a living out of being supposed to be in Blabey's confidence."

"And wasn't he?" Euan asked.

"A bloody good thing for him that he wasn't," said Horace, chuckling hoarsely. "At any rate, they couldn't prove that he was. But no one will look at him now. I wish I hadn't. You haven't got any money you want to invest, I suppose? There's just time." Euan shook his head. "The decent people never have. Wait till you see!"

"What's the matter?" said Euan.

"You'll see, never fear. Now I must go and get the place smartened up." Horace finished his beer, slammed the tankard down on the counter, and strode

purposefully out of the Bar Parlour. For a moment he could be heard outside, shouting reproof to a waiter in the dining-room. " That's right," he cried with ferocious gusto. " You've put the potatoes in the customer's lap, now pour the gravy over them! Why don't you stand on the other side of the room and see if you can hit him with three courses out of four? " His grumblings diminished down the stairs until they became inaudible.

Fat Philip shook his head solemnly at Euan. " The guv'nor's worried, ain't he, sir? " he said. Euan agreed, finished his own drink and stared idly round the empty room. " Quiet to-night, sir," said Philip. " Another whisky, sir? "

" I suppose so," Euan yawned. But as Philip turned for the bottle, the door opened a few inches and Mona looked round it. " Here," cried Euan, " you mustn't come in here." The tawny head disappeared and the door clapped to. He hurried out and found her waiting for him.

She had put on a new, bright dress, which he had not seen before, and round her neck she had a string of oddly shaped, flashing beads, a recent birthday present from him to her. She drooped a little, as though in apology for her lateness, and he hastily enfolded and kissed her.

" Don't, Euan," she cried, warning and laughing at once. " Be careful! "

" What does it matter? Besides, there's no one looking. I must kiss you when you look so jolly."

Her generous mouth curved in a grateful smile—he was not going to scold her for being late. She tucked her hand under his arm and drew him with almost a dancing step towards the dining-room, beginning her story about Mrs. Battcock before they could sit down.

He listened to her chatter with affectionate absent-mindedness, while she sparkled and made the most of the tale. He looked at her and wondered what she really felt towards him, what, for the matter of that, he really felt towards her. Sometimes he had an uneasy

suspicion that she might be in love with him. He was not in love with her. Love? No, but warmth and comfort, companionship and distraction. What, he wondered, too, would become of her? She was twenty-five and she was—easy. He was, he knew, her third or fourth lover. She had told him nothing, except by implication, about the others, but the implications were frank enough. Each time, it seemed to him, she had a little lost her way. He had come dimly to understand that state of mind since he had taken a bed-sitting-room in Queer Street. What did become of girls like Mona? She was one of Post-war's experiments. Did Post-war know what it was after with this pleasant flesh and blood?

While he thus philosophized upon her future, his mistress sat opposite to him and sparkled happily in the light of the hour. He was recalled to her physical presence when Ridgeway Rowland, with a perfunctory: "May I join you?" pulled another chair up to their table. Neither Mona nor Euan said anything, but that did not matter to Rowland. He never brought a companion to the club or arranged to meet one there. He was an eminent publicist and above the frivolity of arranging to meet girls who lived in bed-sitting-rooms. He looked for whom he might find, and if the girl he found had already had dinner with someone else, so much the better.

On this occasion he evidently thought he had found Mona, and she was a little anxious but also a little amused when she saw Euan scowl. Thereafter she was divided between nervousness and gratification at the rudeness he displayed. He addressed no word to their new companion, answered him with grunts, and told, exclusively to her, a story, apropos of nothing apparent, about a persistent journalist whom he had had thrown out of the laboratories. He ended by barking at the waitress when she brought them cheese, and carrying away a flushed, secretly giggling Mona from under the eyes of the dissatisfied and puzzled Rowland.

Downstairs they made to join Harry and Huffy, who instantly ceased an amiable bickering.

"You were talking about something private," said Mona quickly. "You don't want us."

Harry looked at Huffy, and Huffy looked at Harry, who said: "It's a secret. But we'll tell you presently. We don't want to talk about it any more now."

Mona was impatient and began to ask questions, but Euan silenced her with a little authoritative shake of his head, which made Huffy look hopefully at both of them. She changed her fond expression only when her husband kicked her under the table. She might have resumed it, if a stir round the door had not attracted their attention.

Presently it was possible to see that the centre of the excitement was Bertie Farwig, who was declaring in a loud voice: "It's true, I tell you! It's in the paper!"

"Only Bertie," said Mona, making a face.

"It must be something exciting, though," Harry remarked, "since he's come in to tell us all about it. He hasn't been here since he was last reinstated. There must be an attraction elsewhere. But this is scandal, nice juicy scandal about one of Bertie's friends. I can see the juice running down his chin."

And indeed Bertie had produced the effect at which he was aiming. The spreading rumour of his announcement had stopped the dancing, and Bertha had swung round from her piano, regarding sardonically the nymphs and swains who clustered round him, clamouring for details. He obstinately resisted all attempts to take the paper from him. But one nymph had insinuated herself under his arm and another was desperately jumping up and down behind him with her hands on his shoulders.

His desire for a monopoly was hopeless, since apparently what he had to tell was soon told.

"There it is," cried the nymph who had wriggled under his arm. "I can see it. It's quite true. Oh, isn't it dreadful? Let me go, Bertie; you don't want to go on cuddling me all night, do you?" She forced

his arm down, and the paper was snatched from his hands by a gang of determined swains.

The nymph looked round for someone to tell, and her eyes fell on the Telluses' table. She darted across and cried: "Isn't it dreadful? Major Bullace has been arrested!"

Huffy cried out and snatched at her dress, but she sped on, determined to find as many persons as she could to whom she might be first with the news.

Huffy turned to the others with a distressed expression. "How horrible for that poor girl!" she exclaimed. Then, as though hoping for the best, she added in a tone of less dismay: "But perhaps it's only for debt."

"Here, Bertie," Harry ordered. "Come and tell us all about it."

Bertie brightened a little as he obeyed. But he complained that someone had grabbed his paper, and that no one in the club had any manners at all. "But I remember what it said," he proudly assured them. "Arrested last night—up before the beak to-day—remanded for a week without bail. Charged with obtaining money on false pretences from—who do you think?"

"The bonny Earl o' Kirkmabreck," Harry answered promptly.

Bertie looked disappointed. "Then you knew all about it," he said, in an aggrieved tone.

"No. But I saw them together the other day and it's a likely guess. If ever I wanted to bite anyone's ear in a criminal manner, I'd bite Kirkie's for choice. Now you can run away, Bertie, if that's all you know. There must be a few people somewhere who haven't heard the great news yet."

But in this Harry was probably wrong. The sensation had run through the club, and had produced in its way an even greater stir than the fall of Sir Maurice Blabey. For Sir Maurice, though affable enough, had always been a little removed from the other members. Bullace had not. He had danced with all the women

and drunk with all the men. His lounging figure and ready smile had been as much a part of the scenery of the club as Horace's loud laugh, Bray's military efficiency, or Bertha's unwillingness to play the piano save under compulsion. Now, for a moment, the thought of his disaster had put a stop to the routine of the evening. Some of the nymphs, Bertha's particular friends, were clustered round the silent piano, discussing it from all points of view in shrill exclamations. Half the swains had gone off to the Bar Parlour to have a drink on it. Horace, appearing in the doorway, accompanied by a formidable stranger to whom he seemed to attach some importance, was dismayed by this break in the club's activities.

He strode across the room to the piano. "I say, Bertha," he observed, in tones of ominous, metallic mildness, "suppose you give us a tune? They tell me you can play the piano quite nicely."

"Oh, Horace," cried all the nymphs in chorus, "have you heard the news? Would you ever have thought it of him? We never would. We——"

"What news?" Horace muttered, with controlled fury. "Why can't you dance, confound you, instead of behaving as though the brokers were in?" He strode back to his companion, to whom he said: "There'll be more people in the Bar Parlour at this time. We'll go up there."

Meanwhile the strange gentleman had been staring round him in the nonchalantly disparaging air of one who has been asked to buy a second-hand bargain, and is going to do it presently.

"The Yiddisher boy," said Harry reflectively, "is Horace's new backer, who is going to take Blabey's place. I'm rather strong on intuition to-night, so don't contradict me."

At this moment, the Yiddisher boy, still gazing round in spite of Horace's persuasive hand on his arm, caught sight of them, looked puzzled, then bowed from the waist in Mona's direction, with a smile of appalling affability.

"He's Mr. Rosenberg," said Mona, turning very red and looking down as he bestowed one more smile on her before being led away.

Harry whistled. "Your old pal?" She nodded, still crimson, and conscious that Euan's eyes were on her. "My hat, what a beauty! If Huffy wants him to help me in my career, I shall go to the police and ask them to put me in a cell till the danger is past. But I tell you what, the happy home-life of the club is going to be broken up. Not that it will matter to us, but I'm sorry for a lot of people."

Horace Griffin was of the same opinion, but it mattered to him a great deal and he was feeling very sorry for himself. Mr. Rosenberg, who had ordered a *crème de menthe*, was behaving as if he owned the club already, and since no one else showed any sign of wanting to own it, Horace forced himself to be patient.

"They're all drinking beer," said Mr. Rosenberg, raising the bridge of his nose towards the ceiling. He had cleared a place for himself at the bar with great assurance, and was leaning against it, one thick leg elegantly disposed across the other, and gesticulating with a long cigar. "That'll never do. We shall have to stop that."

"Stop beer?" cried Horace, all aghast.

"There's no profit in it," said Mr. Rosenberg conclusively. "No, I don't see no future for a place like this that does a beer trade. If I came in—I say 'if,' mind you—there's a great many things I should want altering. These sausages and onions, for example." He swept his cigar towards the laden beams.

"What's the matter with 'em?" Horace asked sulkily.

"Vulgar—all sprouting, too. Now you . . ." He surveyed Horace in a manner that was not flattering. "You ain't . . ." He seemed to search for words that would tactfully express his meaning. "You ain't exactly what might be called a fancy dresser, are you?"

Horace, who was wearing an old tweed coat, grey flannel trousers, and a blue fisherman's jersey, was too

much wounded by this criticism to speak. "What you want here," Mr. Rosenberg continued, "is someone the ladies will like to look at. Nice shirts, you know," he said, staring fixedly at Horace's jersey, "with a bit of style in them." Horace stared in reply at Mr. Rosenberg's shirt, which was a lilac ground with a wide cerise stripe. "Nice shoes." He stared at Horace's battered, unpolished brogues. He himself wore patent leather boots with decorated white cloth uppers. "You want a man like that on the floor to be jolly with the ladies. That's what sends the turnover up."

For one fascinated instant Horace supposed that Mr. Rosenberg intended to undertake this duty himself. But it was not so. "If I was to come," the reformer pursued, "I think I know where to put my hands on the right man. Just the appearance and the ways ladies like. And he'd be willing to sing two or three times every evening. That 'd give the place a bit more of the Continental touch. Mrs. Rosenberg knows him, and she's bringing him here to-night. Oh, a very nice young fellow, she says. She likes dancing with him—you know." Here he nudged Horace in the ribs and favoured him with a wink like a convulsion of nature. "He calls himself Manuel, or some such name."

Horace groaned, and came near to saying something fatal. But just then Harry entered the Bar Parlour, and, considering that Mr. Rosenberg was standing unjustifiably between him and his Philip, vigorously shoved his way to the counter.

Mr. Rosenberg came out of his wink. "Fine manners some of your members have," he remarked severely. "No class at all. I don't know how you come to let 'em in."

This escaped Harry, who was interested in securing a pint of beer. But Horace, who had with an effort recovered his discretion, said tactfully: "We'd better go down in case Mrs. Rosenberg comes. She can't be shown up here."

"And why not?" asked Mr. Rosenberg, preparing to take offence.

"The Bar Parlour is for men only," Horace explained.

"What!" Mr. Rosenberg cried, almost betraying in his agitation the fact that he had already decided to come in. "I won't have that! Gentlemen only! Why, gentlemen don't spend no real money, only when they have ladies with them. You won't get no turnover like that." But he allowed himself to be shepherded to the door.

Horace returned with an air of secrecy and haste, and Harry asked: "Who is Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the Jews?"

To this Horace replied: "Don't irritate him, there's a good chap. He's going to be King of the Bran Pie." He made a grimace, swallowed half a pint of beer at a draught, and followed Mr. Rosenberg to the dancing-room.

Euan was dancing with Mona, and she was saying in a pleading voice: "I only got uncomfortable because I had a row with him when I left his shop. You do believe that, don't you, Euan?"

"Of course, dear," Euan replied coldly. "It's no business of mine."

Mr. Rosenberg chose this moment, as they passed, to put a broad, hairy hand on Mona's shoulder, and to say, with a gorilla-smirk: "May I have the pleasure of the next, Miss Fenwick?"

Euan swung violently round, out of time, and jabbed his elbow into Mr. Rosenberg's stomach. He also tried to tread on his foot, but failed. "Do you know, sir," said Euan, "that is this a dancing-floor?"

"It *is* true, darling, really," Mona whispered, her face nearly on his shoulder.

"Of course it is, darling," he smiled down at her, feeling better for Mr. Rosenberg's exclamation of pain.

The future King of the Bran Pie, puffing and glaring, was prevented from further pursuit by the arrival of his wife, on whom the ineffably dressed Manuel was literally dancing attendance—at least, he was hopping from foot to foot in his anxiety that no one should jostle her.

Her husband looked the nice young fellow over and approved—natty shirt, green with a sulphur-yellow line, delicately puffed dark green tie, neat tie-pin, a woman's head and bust in mother-of-pearl. He would do. Mr. Rosenberg thought well of the bargain he intended to make.

Horace came downstairs, just in time to hear Manuel say, " Oh yes, Mr. Rosenberg, I'm sure it could be made quite a *nice* little club."

In the Bar Parlour, Harry, alone save for two members who were earnestly playing darts, said solemnly, " Philip, another pint." Philip obeyed. " And one for you."

" Thank you very much, sir, I'm sure," said Philip, obeying again.

Harry raised his tankard in an exaggeration of ceremonial. "*Atque in perpetuum*," he declared, " *frater, ave atque vale.* You don't know what I'm talking about, and it's just as well for you that you don't."

" Thank you very much, sir," said Philip, raising the tankard to his lips. " The best of luck to you too, sir."

IV

" Put away those toys of yours," said Mr. Magsley to Euan. " We are going to a cocktail party."

Euan looked up distractedly at his chief from an electro-magnet which was not behaving as he would have had it behave.

" Do not imagine," said Mr. Magsley, " that I am taking you to give you pleasure. Therefore do not say that you find greater attractions in work. I know you do. So do I. Get your hat and coat, and, if you will, wash your hands."

" But why a cocktail party? " Euan argued.

" Because it *is* a cocktail party," Mr. Magsley replied, " and because we are going to it together. Do not argue. Having made up my own mind, I cannot tolerate hesitation in anyone else."

"Why should I go?" Euan protested. "I want to get this thing right before to-morrow."

"To-morrow," said Mr. Magsley, in a tone of deep melancholy, "there is a party of distinguished journalists coming to lunch and to be shown round the works afterwards. I have been asked to name one of my young men to accompany them. If you would prefer ——"

"Oh, all right," said Euan.

They went to the yard where Mr. Magsley's car awaited them. "Captain Bullinger-Hope's house," said Mr. Magsley to his chauffeur, "in Curzon Street." When they had started, he condescended to go more into detail with Euan. "You have not been invited," he said, "but I will explain you. This is the first care-free family gathering of the Bullingers and the Hopes since the late disaster. It needed the exquisite tact of a Jack Bullinger-Hope to choose the day when the Blabey and Pratz appeal is being heard. I must have some company near me. I must have someone there who will appreciate what I have to say about it afterwards. You have been chosen for the post of honour."

"Am I," asked Euan, "going to be introduced to Lord Bullinger again?"

"If you will look a little less sad, I will promise you, on my word of honour, that Lord Bullinger shall cross the room to you, shake you by the hand, and address you by name—correctly, if possible, though that I will not guarantee. I shall put him up to it."

Euan growled and pushed his shoulders farther into the luxurious upholstery of Mr. Magsley's car. This foolery would probably make him late for his meeting with Mona. But she was very often late. Why not he, once in a while?

Mr. Magsley smiled benevolently on his sulkiness, and said no more until the car stopped. Then he shook him by the shoulder and bade him prepare to go through with his part of the performance as became a scientist and a gentleman. "Think of Volta," urged Mr.

Magsley mysteriously. "Think of Ampère! Think of Edison! Remember what they must have suffered in their time." Euan growled again.

It was an elegant house, thin and tall and self-possessed like a modern lady. It made Euan wonder, as he stood slightly behind Mr. Magsley at the door, whether his shoes had been properly cleaned that morning. The thin, tall, and elegant maid, in a puce uniform, who took his hat and coat, made him wonder how untidy his finger-nails looked. He followed her and his chief into a large room which opened into a conservatory. The room had in it almost more flowers than the conservatory, but they were of glass, of feathers, and of painted metal. On the high, lemon-coloured walls were three or four thin and elegant pictures. The furniture was made of thin and elegantly curved pieces of metal. This was Clarice's room, not her husband's.

It was already tolerably full, and morsels of animatedly languid conversation flew past Euan as he entered. He heard a young man, younger than himself, he thought, saying, "But, my dear, don't you feel that the new geometry makes it so amusing to believe in God again?" He saw, at a distance, Lord Bullinger, talking to a middle-aged woman whom he succeeded in remembering as Mrs. Hartley Spring. He cast one pained and apprehensive glance at Mr. Magsley, who immediately left him and masterfully approached the head of the firm. Mr. Magsley believed in keeping his promises.

"Glad to see you—er—Cartaret," said Lord Bullinger, deserting Mrs. Hartley Spring without reluctance. "Always like to meet you fellows. You always have something interesting to say. Do you know my niece?" He looked round for Lady Kirkmabreck, but she caught his eye too soon, and got farther away. He buzzed for a moment ineffectually and then neatly intercepted Mrs. Bullinger-Hope as she was making a rapid flank movement to escape Sir William Hope. "Want you to meet Mr. Cartaret, Clarice," he said. "One of our most promising young men."

"Are you really?" asked Clarice. "Have you had a cocktail yet?" She hovered a moment with the air of a competent hostess, while the butler proffered a tray containing small glasses of a greenish-yellow liquid. Euan took one and mumbled his thanks to Clarice's back. She was already engaged with Lord Kirkmabreck, whose air of dejection was more than could be explained by the fact that he was holding an empty glass.

"You want another, don't you, Gordon?" she said kindly. "Walters!"

The butler appeared at her elbow and held the tray in front of Lord Kirkmabreck. This was a duty he had never before been called on to perform, and he did it with the air of a man ready for anything but not enough of a superman to do it as though he liked it. He went and consoled himself by saying to Lord Bullinger, "A cocktail, my lord?" He was still further consoled by the plaintiveness of Lord Bullinger's "Isn't there any sherry?"

Euan, left in mid-air, sipped his cocktail and thought it disagreeable. He munched potato-crisps and heard a young man saying, "But, my dear, Harold Nicolson is such an old fogey!" He must have looked deserted, for Clarice returned to him and said brightly, "I have a husband somewhere."

Euan who remembered a story of how she got the husband, made a polite grimace.

"Here he is," she cried, with obvious relief. "Jack, this is Mr. Mmm-r-m. You'll like him better than my young men." She left them, purposefully crossing the room in the manner of an efficiently manœuvred flying column.

"I hope you like this sort of thing," said Jack Bullinger-Hope. "Walters! Get some of these beastly drinks. Mr. Mmm-r-m hasn't got anything." Euan mechanically took another cocktail and saw that his host was staring across the room at his hostess with a perplexed and morose expression.

Clarice's husband was, in fact, perplexed, and the

unfamiliar experience made him feel morose. He could not hear at this distance what was being said, but he could see that she was impressing one of the cocktail-party young men with the readiness and brightness of her wit. He had at first been rather proud of her when he found that she could talk this nonsense as though she had been brought up to it. Good enough—she could do it for both of them. It would save him a great deal of effort, for, though no one had ever guessed it, there were times when Captain Bullinger-Hope was quite fatigued with trying to be polite and to suit himself to his company. But now he sometimes wondered whether she did not really think this nonsense more important and more interesting than the solid facts of his polo-string and the new motor-boat he was having built at Southampton. Quite often he found himself wondering, as now, what were the workings of a human mind that could get itself into such a state. His brow wrinkled as he trod the unaccustomed ground of psychological enquiry, and he forgot all about Euan.

The young man was saying to Clarice, " But, my dear Mrs. Bullinger-Hope, you don't really mean that you're going to East Africa? That's one of the places where they export things and have native questions. Or do they import them? "

" My husband," Clarice replied, " has set his heart on shooting a lion. Or would it be a tiger? "

" My dear," the young man expostulated, " what does it matter? Both lions and tigers are so dreadfully old-fogeyish. If it had been native dances now——"

" Oh, she's *so* happy, Lord Bullinger," Mrs. Durdingham said, a little distance away. " No, thank you very much, Walters, I don't think I'd *better* have another cocktail. I'm not used to them, you know."

Mr. Magsley stole up silently behind Euan and whispered over his shoulder, " I hope you are enjoying yourself."

" Blast you," Euan muttered. " Do you really find this amusing? "

"Immensely," said Mr. Magsley, with conviction, and went away again.

Jack Bullinger-Hope managed to buttonhole Sir William Hope and to relieve his feelings. "I've just been looking at the figures for the new balance-sheet," he began truculently.

"I didn't come here to talk business," said Sir William, stiffening his short square figure.

"You'll have to talk about it at the next board meeting," his nephew said. "Yes, and a hell of a lot there'll be for me to talk about too. God's truth, you've made a pretty mess of it, you and Uncle Arthur between you."

"I don't know what you mean by that, Jack. We're not responsible. . . ."

Mr. Magsley, like a stage Mephistopheles, was again at Euan's ear. "The last time we saw them all together," he murmured, "was when they were eating Blabey's roast beef at Potham. They like one another a little less than they did then. They were all hoping to make money then. Now they've lost it."

"They've still got plenty to spend," said Euan malevolently.

"Oh yes! They're the heaven-born."

Euan began to make a furtive, hopeful movement towards the door. As he went, he heard Lady Kirkmabreck behind him saying, in sharp tones: "Gordon! Put it down! You know what'll happen if you drink whisky after those cocktails." He heard also the dull jar of a decanter replaced on a tray.

He pursued his way, but was held up for a moment by Clarice and Lord Bullinger. "You must talk to Jack yourself, Uncle Arthur," Clarice was saying. "I wish you would. He doesn't take any notice of what I say. There's nothing I should like better than to live in the country and grow roses. You could help me such a lot, couldn't you?"

"Good-bye, Mrs. Bullinger-Hope," said Euan determinedly, and understood Clarice to have said good-bye to him.

But he was still not free. Kirkmabreck dodged in front of him, nervously avoiding the notice of Jack Bullinger-Hope. "Hullo—er—oh, hullo!" said the Earl. "You do remember me, don't you?"

"Hullo," Euan returned, without much friendliness.

"I say," Kirkmabreck burst out, in the high voice of a parrot that suddenly begins talking, "do you remember——"

Euan guessed that he was going to be asked whether he remembered Mona, and was about to thrust the Earl roughly aside when Jack Bullinger-Hope came up with his quarry.

"Hullo, Kirkie," he cried, clapping a heavy hand on the Earl's shoulder. "What are you up to now? Where have you been this afternoon—eh?"

Kirkmabreck winced and was understood to mutter an appeal that that might not be brought up. He also tried to wriggle away, but the heavy hand still held him.

"Here, Walters," said Bullinger-Hope, "isn't there a paper yet?"

"I will fetch it, sir," said the butler, with dignity.

"Well, do fetch it," his master ordered, "and look sharp about it. Don't go"—turning to Euan, since there would have been little fun in baiting Kirkmabreck without an audience. "There's interesting news to-night." The Earl wriggled again. "Oh, I don't mean news about you." Walters brought the paper on a silver tray and Bullinger regarded it for a moment with suspicion. "Here, has somebody else been reading this?"

"No one has touched it since it came, sir," said the butler, with more dignity than before.

"See that no one does. I don't like my papers mauled about by the servants. Bloody thing looks like a last year's bird's nest."

Bullinger-Hope unfurled the *Evening Blazon* and cried with delight: "Here you are, Kirkie, they've given you a good show. Naughty boy you are, aren't you, Kirkie? Trying to put your money in a night club.

Wanted to get a pull with the little ladies, that's what you were after. I don't wonder Gladys keeps an eye on you. How did you get the money out of her, Kirkie?"

The Earl blurted what was meant to be an icy snub.

"Oh, well, never mind, don't say if you don't want to. This chap, Bullace, must have thought he was on to a soft thing. Committed for trial, eh? They'll have some rare fun with you in the box, Kirkie, my lad. But that's not what I wanted. Here we are—'Sentences Confirmed.' And serves 'em both bloody well right. God, the Lord Chief gave it 'em too. Listen to this—'Since these men have seen fit to be in court to hear the result of what I am tempted to call an impudent appeal' . . . and then he let 'em have it."

Kirkmabreck wriggled again and Euan also tried to escape.

"No, don't go. This ought to be a lesson for you, Kirkie. You'll find the witness-box is bad enough, but the dock's worse. I went to see them sentenced at the Old Bailey. You should have seen their faces when old Huggins gave 'em a good sound fourteen years apiece." He laughed aloud, like a man describing a particularly funny scene in a play. "I thought Blabey was going to shout—he looked like an old drunk in a police-court, the sort you see while you're waiting to have your licence suspended, Kirkie. Pratz just gave a silly sort of grin—like a chap who's afraid he's going to be sick."

Euan, with an angry exclamation and an angry gesture, walked straight out of the room.

"Hullo, where's that chap gone? Seemed to be upset about something. Well, you'll let it be a lesson to you, Kirkie, won't you? My word, the man who can get money out of Gladys to put in a night club! After all that's happened! I wonder you didn't tell her it was a dress shop."

EPILOGUE

THE TURNING OUT OF QUEER STREET

I

THE new sales manager of the Arcturus Wireless Company, Ltd. was in a very good mood when he entered the first-class smoker and arranged his parcels carefully in the rack. Even the sight of Bertie Farwig in the opposite corner, which met him when he turned round to sit down, had no power to depress him.

"Where," he asked cheerfully, "did they let you in?"

"Hullo, Harry, old man," said Bertie. "I've come through from the City. Where are you going?"

"Home," said Harry Tellus, with pride that he did not attempt to conceal.

"Home? But I thought you lived near Paddington somewhere."

"We've moved," Harry announced.

"Have you, though? Since when?"

"To-day." Harry was, in fact, so full of having moved that day that Bertie would serve as well as anyone else to hear all that he wanted to say about it. "I hope Huffy has managed to fix up a bed. If not, we shall have to sleep on rolls of carpet, if the carpets have come."

A ticket inspector entered the carriage and Bertie resignedly paid the difference demanded of him. Harry, casually complacent, displayed his first-class season and the inspector touched his hat. Two other men, men of prosperous appearance, also carrying parcels, got in

and settled themselves in the two other corners. There was a slamming of doors and the train started.

"I'm going to make a journey like this," Harry thought to himself, "every night of my life except week-ends and holidays, until I'm rich enough to do it by car." Bertie wondered why Tellus, who was usually an unpleasant, sardonic beggar, should grin at him with so much friendliness.

"Still raining," said one of the men at the other end of the carriage. "I had a couple of slates blown off last night, and I don't suppose anything has been done about them yet. You can't get these local men to do anything in under a fortnight. There'll be a ceiling down when I get home, as like as not."

"I'm having trouble with my drains," his companion replied.

Harry snuffed this conversation appreciatively, as a traveller snuffs the air when he is approaching the sea. Solid householders, these, having trouble with roofs and drains, as he would. He felt so well pleased with all the world that he even tried to listen to what Bertie was saying.

"That," Bertie said, "is the first time I've had to pay."

"Are you living on this line?" Harry asked, a little puzzled. "I thought you had people in London somewhere."

"No, not living," Bertie replied, with a mysterious smirk, "but I've been coming down this way a good deal lately." He waved his hand and his voice took on a self-conscious airiness. "As a matter of fact, old man, I think I'm going to get spliced. I'm dining with her and her people to-night." He opened his overcoat and displayed dinner-jacket and black tie.

"Well, I'm damned!" Harry cried, regarding Bertie with admiration. He added more calmly: "I suppose you both know what you're doing. You don't want any advice to young men, do you? Is it anyone we've ever met?"

"Oh no!" Bertie seemed shocked at the idea. "As a matter of fact her people are clients of mine. I saved her father from dropping a packet over the Blabey crash, and—well, he's still got the packet and she's the only child."

Harry shivered a little. "I wonder what Blabey's doing now," he muttered.

"Picking oakum, or whatever it is they make 'em do. I only hope it's unpleasant. Man like that undermines confidence. He ought to be hanged really. It's worse than murder. You'd never believe how my business fell off after it. Old Smithers—that's her name, by the way—might have been on the street if I hadn't tipped him the wink in time. 'Don't you do it, sir,' I said—he's the sort of old chap that likes you to call him 'sir'—'They may say that Blabey's a mystery man,' I said, 'but he's no mystery to me. You keep off.' So he kept off. Then he asked me to dinner one night, and there we are. Audrey's meeting me at the station to-night in her two-seater. I dare say she knows there wouldn't be any two-seater by now if her old man hadn't taken my advice."

One of the men at the other end said: "The road outside my place is an absolute scandal. I'm thinking of writing to the Council about it." Harry cocked a happy ear in that direction.

When he was able to listen to Bertie again, Bertie was saying: "After all, a man does want to settle down sooner or later. Audrey knows I've been over a bit of grass in my time, and she doesn't think any the worse of me for it. What I say is, it's a mistake to let your wife believe you're an innocent lamb."

"Your views on the management of wives," said Harry, "are very interesting and helpful."

"You've got to know something about women before you get married," Bertie declared. "And I think I ought to know something about women."

One of the men at the other end remarked that his

GIRLS COLL

wife seemed to be unable to find a cook, and that the daily helps in Fulcher's Green were all one more unsatisfactory than the other. Harry, whose newly purchased season-ticket took him to Fulcher's Green, was entranced. Huffy had been so pleased with herself over having engaged a daily help to lend a hand with the cleaning. He looked forward to wonderful domestic conversations about the creature's deficiencies.

The train slowed down and Harry, rising, began with care to collect his parcels. "This is your station, is it?" said Bertie. "Then we can give you a lift. You won't mind sitting in the dickey of Audrey's car, will you? You know—you understand, old man."

They got out in a flurry of rain, crossed a bridge, and fought their way out through a damp, steaming crowd. A rather large young woman, whose projecting teeth would become more noticeable as she grew older, came towards them. She wore a practical leather coat, and a practical manner, and she claimed Bertie much as though she were at the station to fetch a dog which had been sent to her by rail.

"This is Mr. Tellus," said her prospective husband. "We can give him a lift, can't we? There'll be room for him in the dickey."

"No, there won't," said the young woman. "You can go in the dickey. Where is it, Mr. Tellus?"

"Very well, Audrey," Bertie replied. He climbed, with a slip and a curse, up the back of the car.

Harry got in beside Audrey Smithers. "Put me down at the end of my road," he told her. "I'm imposing on you."

She frankly said that she did not want to go far out of her way, because she still had to change. Besides, she added by way of an afterthought, it would be a pity to get Bertie too wet before dinner. Harry's heart was moved towards her. She seemed to take a fairly sensible view of Bertie.

"I say," he suggested, on a sudden impulse, "we're having a sort of house-warming to-night. All picnic

in rooms without any carpets. Couldn't you two come round—just for a drink?"

She accepted, remarking that she liked to meet Bertie's friends. Harry with difficulty held his tongue on that until he was set down at the end of his road. Bertie, damp and chastened, took his place, and the car went on.

Harry turned into the darkness of Windermere Avenue, down which the rain was driving with malignant vehemence. The road was not yet made up and the footway was represented only by a row of kerbstones over which he stumbled into a puddle. The muddy water sprayed up inside his right trouser leg.

"I hope," he said to himself, "that the roof is all right."

The houses he passed were in all stages, from scaffold-poles, to complete decoration with curtains in the windows and lights shining outside the doors to guide the householders home. He identified his own by a pantechnicon at the gate. There was a light here too, but no curtains in the windows. The front door was open, and he went in, making echoes with his feet on the bare boards of the hall.

"Huffy!" he shouted. "Huffy, where are you?"

She came tumultuously down the stairs, a whirl of skirts and disordered fair hair, and fell into his arms. "Harry darling! It's our own house."

"Any trouble?"

"Nothing that matters now you've come home."

A heavy man, mostly swathed in sacking, emerged from the door behind them, coughed and remarked: "That pianola, mum, it won't go into the alcove, not unless you was to saw a bit off it."

Huffy gave him hasty directions and turned again to Harry. "You don't hate coming back to a house like this, do you?" she entreated. "I've tried so hard to get everything ready, but things have gone wrong. The men are just going. They'll have to come back and finish to-morrow."

"Hate it, darling? I love it." He looked fondly at her, and then almost as fondly at the desolate scene that surrounded him. He sniffed with joy the smell of new paint.

"I've got one surprise for you, anyway." Huffy slipped her arm into his and drew him towards the other side of the hall. "Look!" She dramatically threw open a door and stood aside so that he might have a good view of a completely furnished dining-room, with the table laid for dinner and a fire in the grate.

There were silver and glass and little lace mats and a bowl of flowers in the middle. Harry's eyes wandered about the room, and came to rest finally on the side-board. "Finger-bowls," he said, as one in a dream.

"Of course," said Huffy seriously, "this is what you'd call a—a *tour de force*. So is the dinner. But it's a real dinner, and this is a real dining-room, isn't it? I just made up my mind that this should be ready, whatever else wasn't. I expected the maids to think it silly, wanting a proper dinner, but I explained to Cook, and she just entered into the spirit of it."

"Maids!" he murmured, looking at her with admiration. "Cook! Do you know, sweetheart, you talk the language like a native? And do you know that I travelled in the same carriage with two gentlemen from these parts who grumbled to one another all the way about roofs and rates and pipes and plumbers and pavements, just as they should have done? By the way, do you know who else I travelled with?"

"I can't guess."

He told her all Bertie Farwig's news, and added that Bertie and his young woman were coming in for a drink after dinner.

Huffy did not seem to be greatly pleased. "The nasty serpent," she said. "Don't let him drink too much. I won't have him annoying Mona Fenwick."

"My dear child, he isn't going to annoy anyone again. Wait till you see the future Mrs. Farwig."

The thought that Bertie was going to be hen-pecked

reconciled Huffy to the prospect of his presence at their party. Cheerful again, she dragged her husband upstairs to a very sketchily furnished bedroom and made him wash his hands and brush his hair.

"I suppose you wouldn't like me to put on a dinner-jacket?" he enquired, and her second's hesitation in replying made him shout with laughter. "No, my dear, we're not going to that length, not just yet. Doing in Rome as the Romans do is all right, but we're not going native."

Huffy looked abashed, but said: "Come and look at the drawing-room until dinner is served."

"Dinner is served!" Harry echoed rapturously. "Would anyone ever have believed it?"

But they had not been a minute in the desert that to-morrow would be a drawing-room, when the house-parlourmaid presented herself to them. If she felt any surprise at finding her master sitting on a packing-case with her mistress on his knee, she did not show it. She was a tall, proud young person, in a neat green uniform, with a neat little apron and a very neat little cap. She stood to attention as precisely as though Harry in his military days had had the drilling of her, and she said: "Dinner is served, Madam." Harry thought she was secretly laughing at them, and hoped she was.

Huffy said: "Thank you, Laura," and, before her husband's ravished eyes, began obviously to practise going in to dinner decorously and without haste.

They had soup in little green pots, and little pieces of fish with parsley butter on them, and an excellent steak, and mushrooms on toast. Then the house-parlourmaid put the dessert and the finger-bowls on the table, placed the port at Harry's right hand, and prepared to withdraw.

"Was it all right?" Huffy asked anxiously.

"Couldn't have been better. You've struck a good cook."

"Laura," said Huffy, with dignity, "please tell Cook

that Master was very pleased with the dinner." As she spoke, she realized that Harry was about to say "Master!" in awed accents under his breath, and gave him a warning look.

He checked himself, and there was silence for some moments after Laura had gone. Then Huffy said: "What sort of a day have you had?"

Harry nodded in appreciation. "You're almost word-perfect," he said. "You might have been living in Fulcher's Green all your life. I'll bet there's not a dinner-table in the whole town where a wife hasn't just said that or isn't just going to say it."

Huffy got up and rushed at him, a dove pretending to be a Fury. "Stop rotting, Harry," she cried, pulling his hair. "Haven't I asked you that every night since we've been married? Why do you want to pretend everything's changed?"

"I know, darling. Ow, that's really hurting. . . ." He pushed his chair back and placed her forcibly on his knee. "Yes, I know. And sometimes the answer wasn't too good, was it?" There was a sentimental and pleasant interlude, at the end of which he said: "How have I got on to-day? Not so badly. I'm getting that office into shape and the big bosses are really backing me."

"Good, dearest one. I know you're going to make a success of it."

"I think I am," Harry modestly replied. "How about a glass of port? No? Well, I shall." He lifted her off his knee and helped himself. "I suppose some of those people will be turning up any minute."

"Do you think we ought to have asked them to-night, before the house is straight?"

"Of course we should. If you don't have a house-warming on your first night in a house, why have it at all? And as a matter of fact," he added frankly, "I couldn't wait to ask people to my own house."

"We'll have a dinner-party soon," said Huffy. "Cook loves them she told me so."

He sipped his port and played with a dessert-knife. "Oh, by the way," he said, after a little silence, with an air of perfect insincerity, "I forgot to tell you. I asked Phyllis to come along."

"I knew you'd got something on your mind," Huffy assured him. "What made you do that?"

"Why shouldn't she come?" he demanded.

"Mona and Euan are coming together. It will be awkward."

"Why should it be?"

"You know very well why. You know Euan wanted to marry Phyllis, and Mona knows it too."

"Oh, nonsense," said Harry uneasily. "All that was over a long time ago."

"You think anything's a long time ago if it happened before you decided to settle down and be respectable. I know it's all over, but it'll be uncomfortable, Harry."

"It won't. I'll fill 'em all up with drink. Anyhow, I couldn't help it. When I saw Phyllis this afternoon plugging away at her work, I felt she just had to be asked." For answer Huffy came to his side and hugged him. When he emerged, he said: "Anyway, it's raining like blazes. I don't suppose anyone will turn up."

But a bell rang, and there was the sound of a knocker, loud because it was on an open door, and the sound of trampling feet. No one had remembered to close the door after the moving men had gone. The first guests had walked into the empty house, and Laura, unnerved by the fact, could be heard letting her natural haughtiness get out of hand. Huffy ran to the rescue. Harry thoughtfully poured out another glass of port and waited in a carefully casual attitude for someone to be shown in to him.

At last Euan was shown in by Laura, who said: "Will you take coffee in here, sir?"

"Yes, in here, please, Laura," Harry answered, swelling with pride. "Sit down and have some port,

Euan." He straddled across the fireplace, and thrust his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat. It seemed to him to be the appropriate pose.

II

Huffy took Mona and Phyllis upstairs, dropping apologies on the way, rather as small parcels are dropped from overloaded arms. "I'm so sorry we're in such a state. You won't mind picnicking, will you? Moving is so dreadful, isn't it? I've never really moved before. We didn't move into that flat in Paddington at all, we just went there. This is our bedroom."

It certainly had a bed in it, but not much else. The only mirror stood on the floor, still swathed in wrappings. The dressing-table was occupied by various newspaper-covered objects. Trunks, suitcases, and cardboard boxes hid most of the floor.

Mona produced a mirror and other apparatus from her handbag. "It's something to be thankful for," she said, as though there were much for which no one could be thankful, "that it's stopped raining. As it is, Euan went into a puddle up to his knees."

Huffy made a clucking noise of distress and sympathy and apologized for the state of the road. Phyllis was silently busy with her own glass and powder-puff.

"Did you all come together?" Huffy asked.

"We met in the train," said Mona, as though it were the sort of thing one couldn't help, and tugged peevishly at her hair with a little pocket-comb.

Huffy turned to Phyllis, and hoped that Harry wasn't overworking her.

"I'm afraid I'm slow and stupid," Phyllis answered. "Mr. Tellus is very patient with me."

"I shouldn't have called him that," Mona remarked over her shoulder.

"Are you—are you comfortable in your rooms?" Huffy enquired.

"Oh yes, very. I've got a bed-sitting-room, you know, in Dudley Street. It's very nice there. I have my own gas-ring, and I can cook all my meals."

When they were both ready, Huffy took them on a personally conducted tour of the house. They admired the servants' bedrooms and the spare room, and the room at the back which Huffy said she was going to use for lumber, but which might come in useful for something else some time. Mona warmed a little out of her bad temper, and asked intelligent feminine questions about carpets and distempers. Phyllis seemed, to Huffy's tender heart, to be aloof and sad. As they went downstairs, they met the two men coming up.

"Just going to show Euan over the house," said Harry.

Huffy wondered whether anyone else was likely to come on a night like this. "But," she said, "we'd better be prepared for them."

Her preparations began with lighting the gas-fire in the drawing-room and arranging bottles on a table there. Then Harry's parcels were opened, and the two girls helped Huffy to put salted nuts and stuffed olives and other oddments in little dishes. This meant going in and out of the kitchen, where a respectable cook beamed uncertainly, but tolerantly, on the young lunatics who gave a party on the day of moving in a house in which the carpets had not yet been laid.

"We could still get the carpet down," said Cook, in an effort to enter into the spirit of the thing. "Just rough-like, you know, mum."

"Oh yes, we could, madam," cried the young Laura, leaping forward. She was still proud, but she thought that these people, though queer, were going to be exciting. She had a little good-natured wrangle about it with Cook, later in the evening.

"It's a cocktail-party," she explained to the older generation.

"'Ow can you 'ave a cocktail-party after dinner?" Cook crushingly asked.

Laura was indeed for a moment crushed, but she remembered her Sunday newspapers and came up again with the assertion that it was a bottle-party.

"An' 'oo," asked Cook, "'as so far brought a bottle? Enough bottles 'ere already, if you ask me."

Huffy was grateful but firm about the carpet. "It's sweet of you, Cook," she said, "but it'll be so much more fun with everything all over the place. They won't mind, bless you."

Cook was a little damped and observed that by rights she and Laura ought both to be hard at work scrubbing.

"We'll do all that to-morrow, won't we?" said Huffy winningly. "When Master has gone. He won't be back till the evening, and we shall have all the day to ourselves. There's the door, Laura!"

Laura reassumed her proudest look, and went to discharge her duties, while Huffy hurried Mona and Phyllis into the drawing-room. In spite of the weather, the guests had begun to arrive. It seemed that they had all missed the train on which Mona and Phyllis and Euan had travelled, and had caught the next. This pressed rather hard on Laura, but the admiring awe with which some of the detachment from the Bran Pie regarded her trim uniform and perfect manners sent her head up higher than ever.

Soon the desert of a drawing-room was alive with voices and the splashing of siphons, and Huffy's bed-room was a creditable copy of Mrs. Badger's department on a busy evening. Bertie Farwig and his young woman arrived almost unnoticed. Phyllis was the first person they saw whom Bertie knew and he seized upon her, forgetting altogether what he thought about her father.

"Want to introduce you," he said. "Mrs. Bullace—Miss Smithers."

"Bertie," said Miss Smithers, "you had better get us something to drink."

"Drinks? You've come to the right department. Just watch me, Audrey." He plunged with chivalrous

enthusiasm into the crowd round Huffy's improvised buffet.

"Do you know Bertie well?" asked Miss Smithers.

"Not very well," Phyllis replied, trying not to sound as though she were glad of it.

"Ah," said Miss Smithers, without trying.

"Harry," whispered Huffy, urgently in his ear, "don't you think they'd like to dance?"

"Of course they would. I'll play the pianola for them."

"I think they'd like the wireless better."

"But I want to play the pianola in my new house."

"Very well, darling." She snuggled herself against him for a moment before running to the pantry to fetch more bottles of beer.

Harry, protruding into the room as he sat at the pianola which the alcove would not accommodate, attacked the Rosenkavalier waltzes with much spirit. Two or three couples began to revolve, cautiously at first, then more recklessly. They were joined by others. All of them jostled Harry from time to time as they passed him, but he continued to pedal devotedly, swaying from side to side, as he manipulated the levers, in a sort of ecstasy and putting expression into his rendering as though he were throwing it in by the bucketful. There was a sound of smashing glass. Huffy, returning, looked dismayed for a moment: she had chosen those glasses with so much care, and had spent on them so much more than she had intended. But, she told herself, it was the fortunes of war, and luckily no one seemed to have been disturbed by it. She picked up the pieces unobtrusively.

When she came back from throwing them away, the music had sorted all the people out into those who knew one another and those who did not. Those who knew one another were dancing, or had something better to do than dancing. The rest were hanging about in corners looking uncomfortable.

Huffy made a dash at the first couple she saw and

conveyed to them her belief that they were Euan's sister and her husband, neighbours of the Telluses in this strange country of Fulcher's Green. Herbert Thoday appeared to be prepared to admit the fact, though strictly without prejudice.

"How nice for us it is that you live here too," said Huffy. "Now Euan will be able to drop in on us when he comes to see you."

"I don't suppose," said Lucy, "that my brother will come to see us very much. He seems to have too many other interests." She looked significantly at Euan as she spoke. He was dancing with Mona, who so far had not allowed him to leave her side. "He hasn't even spoken to us yet."

"He can't know that you're here," cried Huffy, anxious as always that no one should be able to complain of anyone else. She cried in a louder voice: "Euan, Mona." They paused in their dancing and obeyed the call.

"Hullo, Lucy! Hullo, Herbert!" Euan exclaimed, when he discovered why he had been summoned. He introduced Mona to them, and she endeavoured to be agreeable and natural at once. It was a difficult moment for Mona, because she had not known that any of Euan's relations would be at the party. She was rewarded by a disillusioned stare of examination from Lucy.

"We've got some other neighbours here," said Huffy, in an effort to apply warmth to an unmistakable chill. She shot like a minnow across the room to Miss Smithers and towed her triumphantly back.

"We've met before, haven't we?" Miss Smithers said, as though reluctantly, to Lucy. "Didn't you play against us once?"

"I think I remember it," replied Lucy, without committing herself.

"My wife," said Herbert, and it seemed odd that he did not say "my client," "was captain of the women's team in the Terrington Lane Club at Highgate."

Miss Smithers managed to look respectful and resentful at once. Her own hold on a place in the women's team of the Fulcher's Green Club was precarious. If this hard-bitten woman, already well exercised on the stricken field of female tennis, were to dispute that place with her, she would sink to a level not much above that of the rabbits.

"But I've given up tennis," said Lucy. "My husband doesn't play, so we're going to take up golf together."

Huffy heaved an almost audible sigh of relief, and went back to Harry at the pianola. "That was lovely," she said. "Don't you think they'd like something more vulgar? You *have* got some vulgar tunes, haven't you?"

Harry patted her shoulder, and began to play a fox-trot which had the effect Huffy desired. The party, that is to say, became slightly more chaotic, and more of her guests paired off in contentment with one another. Euan, bless him, was dancing with his sister, and Herbert, though very badly, with Miss Smithers.

Huffy hastened to make Mona known to the junior partner of the publishing firm which she had just left. He was a round-faced, fluffy young man with horn-rimmed spectacles and an eager manner, and Mona condescended to him a little. He was open to condescension. He had spent a whole year wondering whether Mrs. Tellus might not be unhappy in her marriage, and whether she would snub him if he asked her out to dinner. Now, having witnessed every kind of demonstration that she was happily married, he felt himself a little adrift. Mona thought that probably he was the kind of man whom Euan would like her to know.

The party began to feel itself at liberty in the unfurnished house, began to disperse and to explore. Mona introduced the young publisher to Euan, and then Harry took Mona away. Euan and the young

publisher somehow got into the dining-room together, and almost arranged that Euan should write a popular book on the principles of electric traction. Couples established themselves on the stairs and found quiet corners beside cupboards on the landing. Euan and the publisher had a couple of glasses of port apiece and agreed that they would lunch together about that book on some still unspecified date.

"Very well, then," said Euan for the third time, "you'll ring me up one day next week."

"That's right," said the publisher, also for the third time. "Then we can go into it properly."

"You and Laura can go to bed," said Huffy, on a visit to the kitchen. "We shan't want you for anything more. I only hope that we shan't keep you awake."

"Oo, no, madam," said Laura, who was excited by the mere noises of a party, and would not have gone to bed for worlds. "You might want me for something. There, listen!" It was the doorbell again, and she sprang to answer it, justified in her contention.

The new arrival expressed to Mrs. Tellus the hope that she was not too late. "I missed two or three trains," she said nonchalantly. "I was dining with a man who was a nuisance. You don't know who I am, do you? I'm one of your husband's canvassers. My name is Stonier, Enid Stonier."

Huffy exclaimed untruthfully: "Of course . . . I know . . ." and took her upstairs, carefully ignoring a couple wedged in the very turn where everybody who went to look for more privacy was bound to fall over them. Enid threw off her hat and coat and passed a hand carelessly over her thick, short hair.

"I'm ready," she said, "I don't suppose anyone here will know me. I haven't been at the Arcturus long, and your husband hasn't been at head-office quite as long as that."

They went down and met Euan as he broke away

from the dining-room and the publisher in a search for Mona.

"Euan, my child!" Enid cried. "Where did you spring from?" Huffy was pleased enough that the new guest knew someone there, and left them together.

"Why, Enid!" Euan exclaimed. There was a pause.

"You look surprised to see me," she said. "Come and tell me all about it."

Euan was surprised, not so much at seeing her, as at the fact that he was trembling all over and that his voice was out of control. In idle hours, for a little while after their parting, he had pictured to himself some such accidental meeting as this. But in his picture he had always carried the thing off with a light hand. Now it did not seem to be so easy.

"Can't we dance?" she suggested, tender towards his confusion. Harry had got back to the pianola and to the sort of music that he himself liked best, and was dispersing Tchaikovsky's *Valse des Fleurs* about the room by the spadeful. Euan took Enid in his arms and steered her through the open door of the drawing-room.

"Apparently we can't," she said, before they had reached the other end. "I don't know whether it's your fault or mine. Let's sit down, and you can get me a drink."

When Euan got to the table, he found himself next to Mona, who, vivaciously as she had been talking to an unknown companion, turned at once to him.

"Where have you been, Euan?" she asked accusingly. "I thought you'd deserted me altogether."

"Got to get a drink," he mumbled. He got Enid a drink of some sort, he did not know what, took it to her and seated himself at her side in obvious discomfort.

"Well, tell me your news," she said in friendly fashion.

"Nothing worth telling." Thus, in these circumstances, appeared to him all the events of the last year.

"I'm surprised! Now I am going to be married." That surprised him, and he showed it. "Yes—fixed it up at dinner to-night. We're going to be married next month."

"Where is he?" asked Euan, looking round the room.

"Oh, he's not here. I sent him home. He made me miss my train and I'd had enough of him." Presumably Euan put on an enquiring look, for she continued, as though in answer to a question: "He's a very solid person. He controls fourteen garages and over thirty petrol stations. He's forty-three, he is devoted to his mother, and he's never been in love before."

It may further be presumed that the look of enquiry persisted on Euan's face. Enid looked back at him quizzically, and said: "I've never been in love before either, Euan. I want to settle down—that's what I'm in love with. These sudden passions, you know! I'm going to have a child. Oh, no . . . don't look so shocked . . . not at once, say in a year or so from now. Who's that pretty red-haired girl who keeps on trying to catch your eye?"

"Girl I brought here to-night," Euan grunted. "If she's alone, I must go to her. Do you mind, Enid?" he added, more gently.

She took his hand, and raised her eyebrows, in a friendly way. He shook his head, suddenly more at ease with her. As in the old days, he and she got on better the less they said to one another. She let his hand go, grinning the familiar, wide grin, and showed her rather large, white teeth. He went to join Mona, who introduced him to the man and the girl with whom she was talking. But he had barely seen them before she drew him aside.

"Look at Bertie," she said in an excited whisper.

He looked at Bertie and saw what she meant. Bertie and his young woman were advancing with difficulty down the room, apparently searching for their host and hostess. But their demeanour was different from

what it had been. The young woman had an additional complacency, the not quite so young man wore a frightened smirk. Harry, rising from the piano-stool to get a fresh piece, saw them, and realized that they needed special attention.

"Harry, old man," said Bertie jerkily, "we're going to be spliced."

Harry, choosing his phrases with care, congratulated Bertie, and wished Miss Smithers the best of luck. Then, in order to cover anything that might have seemed too discriminating in his reception of the news, he shouted loudly for Huffy.

"Yes," Bertie said to Huffy, "it happened in your box-room."

"How lovely!" Huffy exclaimed.

"We must all have a drink on it," said Harry.

"Only a small one, Bertie," said Bertie's future wife. "If we don't go home soon, Father will have gone to bed."

By the time their glasses were charged, Harry had managed to put Mendelssohn's Wedding March on the gramophone, and he touched it off suddenly at the proper moment. The chatter stopped throughout the room, and all the guests looked round for the reason. It was not hard to find, for Bertie was pleased enough to be the centre of attention. He raised his glass to all and sundry, and stood up to the shower of congratulations, as though he were a conqueror pelted with roses. There were those present who had never seen him before, and none of them had ever seen Miss Smithers before, but the congratulations were sincere enough. This event had happened in their midst, and it was exciting. They all felt, and Huffy felt with them, that a betrothal occurring at a house-warming must surely bring luck to the new house.

The young woman, on her side, was pleased to see that Bertie was so popular, though she did wonder a little whether she would have to go on knowing all these queer people. She had been momentarily softened

by what had happened in the box-room, or she would not have been so weak as even to consider it possible. You never knew, she told herself uneasily, with newcomers in a district. If she had not been in a sort of mood to-night because she felt that Bertie was going to propose, she would never so incautiously have accepted so free and easy an invitation. It was not even past the bounds of possibility that this woman and her husband with the queer name would expect to be asked to the Smithers's bridge-parties.

This thought made her say in a sharp undertone: "Come alone, Bertie, if you want to see Father to-night."

Bertie peered rather wistfully into his empty glass, but put it down. He then departed, under escort, for his interview with Father, wearing the expression of a man who has just started off down a switchback and is not quite sure whether he is going to enjoy it or be sick.

Their going set the others in motion, and there was a good deal of wrangling about last trains, and Harry was chaffed a good deal about his decision to live at the back of beyond. But to all chaff he replied with a smile of quiet satisfaction.

Pair by pair the guests set off upon their hazardous journey to the station.

"Lucy," said Herbert Thoday, "we mustn't keep Auntie Mabel up any later." He produced an electric torch from his overcoat pocket. "Can't do without this here," he remarked. "Good-night, Mrs. Tellus. Remind your husband to let me know if you have any trouble about the making up of the road."

Euan saw Enid going in the company of the publisher, and speculated as to whether that might not be her next job. Then he remembered that she was going to marry fourteen garages and over thirty petrol-stations. A glance through the door showed him that the publisher had come in his own car, and was going to take Enid back in it. He hoped there might be no disappointment

for the man who was devoted to his mother and had never been in love before.

He was waiting in the hall for Mona when Phyllis came downstairs ready to go. Unobservant as he was, he noticed how her cheap little hat and coat contrasted with the clothes she used to wear. Yet she seemed to have changed neither in her aloofness nor in her curiously childish expression.

They stood awkwardly for a moment. Then she said: "They've got a nice house, haven't they?"

"Very nice," he replied, feeling grateful to her.

"Huffy will love having a place of her own."

"They're a jolly couple," Euan said.

Huffy upstairs was saying earnestly to Mona: "Why don't you and Euan settle down together like this?"

"For one thing," said Mona, her back to her admonitress, peering into her little glass and tucking loose ends of hair under the brim of her hat, "we're not married, like you and Harry."

"Yes, I know, but——"

"You mean we might as well be. Also we mightn't. Euan hasn't asked me, and I wouldn't if he did. I don't want to settle down. It's much more fun to go about together as we do, without being tied." She turned round as she said this, as though feeling that Huffy would never believe her while she kept her face averted. "Then, if one of us should get bored with the other, there's no trouble."

"I think," said Huffy, with placid conviction, "that Euan's a fool."

At that moment, Euan's voice rose from below. "Aren't you ready, Mona?" it said. "We shall miss that train if you don't look out."

Mona gave Huffy a queer, not a very happy little smile. "Yes," she murmured, "I suppose in some ways we *might* just as well be married." They kissed impulsively and went downstairs.

Harry was there, looking at his watch. "You've plenty of time," he said, "if you keep out of the puddles

and don't have to swim half the way." He sauntered through the door with them and thoughtfully regarded the front elevation of his new house. "It's a good thing, isn't it," he observed, "that I'm not artistic, only musical?"

"Good-bye," cried Mona from the gate, waving her hand. "We'll see you at the club, one night soon."

"I don't think you will," said Harry, with an answering wave. Then he slammed the door.

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